VOLUME 16
NUMBER 2

AMAZING STORIES

MARCH 1942

MEN OF THE BRONZE AGE by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

244 PAGES

AMAZING STORIES

DISCIPLES OF DESTINY

by DON WILCOX

MARCH

25c

AT THE FIRST SIGN OF A

COLD OR SORE THROAT

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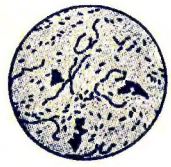

BEFORE

AFTER

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MARCH
1942

AMAZING STORIES

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

VOLUME 16
NUMBER 3

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Front cover painting by Robert Fuqua, illustrating a scene from **"Disciples of Destiny"**
Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul, depicting an Earth City **"As Mars Sees Us"**
Illustrations by Robert Fuqua, J. Allen St. John, Rod Ruth, Joe Sewell

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Volume 16
Number 3

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you A Sealed Book of explanation without obligation. This Sealed Book tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

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The ROSICRUCIANS
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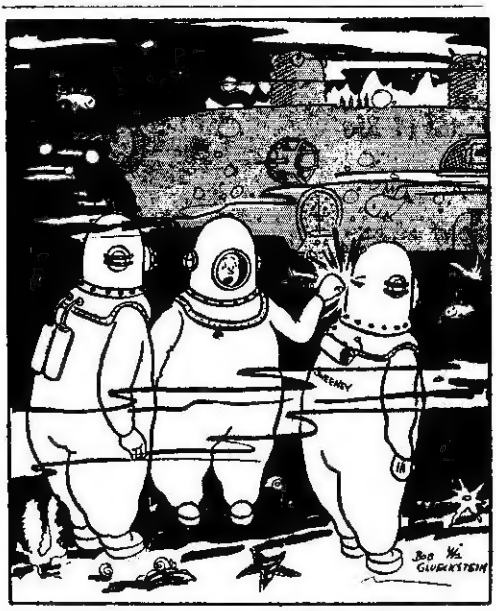
THE prophecy that is contained in the stories published in AMAZING STORIES has long been recognized. Very many things that our writers have imagined in the stories in this magazine have come true with startling faithfulness. We have remarked before of the super-tank which Hitler used to smash Belgium and France. We have told you of many things that were to come, that actually did come. That is one of the things science fiction has to its credit. Our writers have imagination, foresight, vision. They can, and do, see the future. Marvelously so.

BUT on December 7th, 1941 the imagination of AMAZING STORIES and its authors demonstrated that it could not match the real truth. No matter how brilliant the minds of those men, and women, who write science fiction; no matter how fertile their visions; no matter how incredibly supernormal their concepts—none of them could possibly have approached, nor ever did approach, the true reality of the future that then became the grim present, and is now the soul-shattering past. Because the minds of civilized men and women cannot conceive of the incredible treachery, the horrible infamy, the searing shame that is now, and shall always remain, synonymous with the little yellow bellies of Japan.



"No answer, guess he's not in"

SCIENCE fiction writers have given us stories of invasions by the Nipponese. Eando Binder beat them off with the help of Adam Link in "Adam Link Fights a War." A. R. Steber fought them, and destroyed even the island of Japan, in "When the Gods Make War." Major S. P. Meek (now fighting the LYBs in reality) wrote of future wars uncannily close to the reality of today. Dozens of our writers have foretold this attack. But none of them dreamed of its treachery. In this we see the true awfulness of the shame that has come upon the Japs, a shame that not even science fiction writers will be able to erase. Not even imagination. . . .

THE other day we visited the studio of J. Allen St. John, famed artist of the Burroughs stories, whose work has delighted you on our covers and those of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and it proved to be the charming factor that snatched us back from the brink of boiling anger and restored to us a measure of sanity and faith in humanity.

Artists, today, seem to be fellows who work in a very prosaic office, on a prosaic drafting table, and with air-brush and compressed air tank at their side. We didn't believe that there were any of those romantic old-world studios left, with the massive easel, wood-railed balcony, and the atmosphere of every country in the world scattered helter-skelter around; from paintings of Venice and Algiers to hammered brass objects of Morrocco, from half-finished nudes to self-portraits, from bourbon to Chinese laquer.

St. John is an artist who has lived. If you don't think so, visit his studio sometime.

And incidentally, our visit resulted in a cover which you will agree is his best for us to date.

(Concluded on page 123)

ADVERTISEMENT

DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 91L, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

Bradford fired into the mob, but too late. The Jap was dead

# of Destiny

by
DON WILCOX

Hitler, Moussolini, Hirohito were but disciples of this weird old man who made the earth shake from his tower of evil science!

DANGER! . . . Danger! . . . Storm over the Flinfiord . . . Danger!"

The low-spoken warning was scarcely more than a whisper in the earphones—a girl's whisper, at that. It certainly didn't have the sound of an official weather forecast, but the ominous tone sent chills through Ross Bradford's arms and fingers. His left hand tightened on the stick. He checked his altitude.

"Danger! . . . Danger! . . ."

Ross shot a glance at his companion. Hank Switcher had gone to sleep with his earphones on. Now he was stirring. He pushed his pudgy face up from between his shoulders like a sleepy turtle coming out of its shell. Then his head lopped down again and he began to snore gently.

"Storm over the Flinfiord! . . . Beware! . . ."

Hank Switcher gave a disturbed snort. His eyes kept on sleeping but his mouth woke up enough to mumble, "What th' hell is Flinfiord?"

"It must be an island," said Ross.

"Never heard of it."

Hank managed to open one eye, but all he saw was a patch of midnight sky smeared with a thin sprinkling of stars. "There's no storm. What's she talking about? She must be a radio ham playing pranks. Are you about to get this bomber delivered to merry old England?"

"Less than two hours to go, if the weather behaves."

"You see any storm?"

"Not a sign. The sky's clear."

"Altitude?"

"Ten thousand, and still on the gyropilot."

"Wake me up when we get there," Hank groaned, and hunched down for another sleep.

"Fishermen of the Flinfiord, take

warning! . . . Travelers on the coast road should find shelter . . . Airplanes, veer northward to avoid region of the Flinfiord . . . A storm is about to break in this vicinity . . . A storm . . ."

Veer northward! Ross Bradford snorted. He was already north of his course, and he did not intend to lose any more ground. The secret British airport on the coast of Scandinavia was waiting for this bomber, and he, as an American volunteer pilot, meant to get it there before daylight.

Ross searched the instrument board. He checked the readings on the temperature gauges for the four whirlwind motors. The plane was holding a steady two hundred miles per hour. Out under the starry sky Ross could now see the heavy black of a rugged island looming up on the horizon.

"Damn, what a voice," Hank Switcher smiled blissfully. "If that gal's a radio ham, I should have gone in for radio instead of book writing. Listen to her—"

"Something's screwy." Ross pushed a map into Hank's hands. "There's no official weather station charted for this region."

Switcher blinked at the map for a minute. There wasn't even a Flinfiord.

"Mysteries that pass in the dark," Hank Switcher mused, jotting idly in his notebook. "Another story that might have been. Lovely voice—lovely girl. Maybe she's warning her lover that the old man's come home, or something. Whispering it in code, you know. Storm coming up—that means the old man's pacing the floor—"

"Bosh! You're always writing shotgun stories."

"Anyway, it's an item in my literary notebook. But, darn it, this is just my luck. Mysteries everywhere and I just sideswipe them. That sweet little voice says veer northward, so we have to veer northw—"

"We didn't veer," Ross snapped.

"Huh?"

"We'll shoot straight over yonder island in another five minutes."

Hank jammed his notebook in his pocket and peered through the windshield. "You mean we're gonna run smack into that storm, after she warned us—"

"So you fell for it," Ross chuckled. "Well, I didn't. The sky's as clear as—"

A wide flare of lightning jumped across the sky.

"It's coming! . . . The storm! . . . Take shelter!"

CLICK. The mysterious station switched off. Ross and Hank exchanged blank stares. The veteran pilot's hand tightened on the stick. His eyes combed the dials, then fastened grimly upon the vast midnight landscape.

Hank Switcher took refuge in his notebook. "Flash out of nowhere," he jotted. "The voice of a girl. Throbbing with fear. Appeal. Gathering troubles. Impending doom. Doesn't make sense, but keeps echoing in your ears."

Suddenly the outside world went blinding white. The lightning flash seemed to be everywhere at once.

It came again, held on for three or four seconds.

"That's no natural lightning," Ross Bradford snapped. "Gimme my colored specks."

A hard clap of thunder ripped against the plane. Ross threw open the vents on each side and the wind roared into the control cabin.

The plane was nosing down when the next flash came. Through their dark glasses Ross and Hank saw the core of that flash. It was far beneath them, di-

rectly over the promontory on the farther point of the island.

"I can still see it," Hank sang out, jiggling his head to shake the image out of his eyes. "That kind of light bores in and hangs on like—"

Ripping thunder drowned their talk. The storm was growing into something terrifying, colossal, unnerving. Hank gritted his teeth. If he had been suddenly tossed into a seething volcano the surprise couldn't have been much greater. Clouds were forming out of the roaring wind. They puffed out almost like jets of steam, only dark and dangerous-looking. The sky was becoming overcast.

Ross Bradford caught another view of the lightning spray before the storm's darkness spread a black blanket between the plane and the island ahead.

What Ross saw was an ocean-wide wheel of light. Several arms of the violet-white rays stabbed out from a circular core at the top of that black promontory, leaped in straight lines like the spokes of a wheel, flared like a dozen giant beacons powerful enough to encompass the very ocean.

Every flash of that ubiquitous light ended with a hard, roaring crash of thunder. Every crash brought on a shifting swirl of tornado. The big plane trembled, swerved downward, refused to straighten out. Suddenly a section of the fuselage ripped with a grinding metallic crunch. Ross was thrown against the instrument board. He felt the safety belt tug at his stomach.

Then he saw Hank, wide-eyed, throwing off his safety belt with nervous hands. Ross understood. He quickly checked the parachute harness that clasped his companion, shouted, "'Sworth a try . . . Count ten, Hank!"

ROSS touched a lever. The bomb hatch flew open, and Hank fairly rolled for the opening. He threw his hand in a motion for Ross to follow. Then he was gone.

But through the bomb hatch Ross caught a glimpse of wreckage swirling black against the violet-white shaft of light—the rudder and fin, the stabilizers—

All control was gone now except the ailerons. Ross fought wildly, but the steep dive took his breath. His consciousness hovered in the balance. Yet even as the blackness threatened to engulf him he knew, from the gleams of light that shot along the inner walls—from the screaming of winds—*that the whole tail of his ship was gone!*

It had gone instantly, not with the scream of ripping fuselage yielding to overpowering winds. It had *dissolved.* That stream of light had cut the rear end of the ship off—disintegrated it!

A horrifying dizziness was Ross' only sensation now. He lost his grip on his hope that the falling plane might not strike Hank—that Hank might live to explain—

What was *this?* A sickening, weird, unbelievable something seized the last shreds of Ross' consciousness. He was seeing a strange face, a pair of evil eyes, hanging there in the darkness, glaring—glaring—a haunting, torturing vision.

All the hatred and anger and viciousness in the world seemed to focus in that pair of eyes. They came larger, gleaming with a luminous hypnotizing power, hurling their diabolical challenge squarely at the falling pilot. They seemed to accuse him, charge him with all the wrongs of a wicked world.

They came closer, brighter, harder—until the very lightning that filled the sky seemed dim in comparison. Had they come simply to torture Ross Bradford in his last moment of life—glaring—glaring—*glaring*—

CRASH!

CHAPTER II

A Madman's "Statistics"

ROSS BRADFORD clung tenaciously to the slimy rock. Cold waves dashed over him intermittently; perhaps the waves had brought back his consciousness.

The storm was subsiding now, though the sky and sea were still black. Ross' thoughts came clearer with every deep full breath. Now he was not even sure that he had lost consciousness at any time during the dive and crash. His ears still echoed with the awful hiss of the burning plane. But everything had happened so swiftly—the blind head-on smash against jutting rocks, the explosion of fuel tanks, the slush of black waves over the burning plane.

He fought his way upward out of reach of the waves. Here the ragged rock was dry against his ripped and torn fingers. He sprawled over a flat surface, closed his eyes, felt the vibrations of the pounding sea. There was nothing to do but sleep until morning.

His consciousness dulled away, tortured though it was by pain. The dull ache in his left upper arm sharpened to a blow-torch burn. His eyes again seemed to see the fire of exploding fuel tanks—a flame that twisted and turned into a memory of those mysterious eyes, burning hot with evil, that had glared at him so vividly a few minutes before.

Eyes out of nowhere—what could it mean?

And that other mysterious spell—the voice of the girl who had tried to warn him—

Ross awoke to the shout of one Hank Switcher.

Grey dawn ripped across the waters. A dory was plodding through the waves, and the pudgy turtle-like figure in the prow was waving his arms like a commodore winning his first victory at sea.

"Are you alive?" Switcher yelled.

"What do you think?" Ross retorted.

"Hell, after all the trouble I had finding a stretcher."

Ross rose stiffly, rubbed his burnt arm, ran his fingers through his towsled hair. "I'm all right except for being pickled in salt water. But the bomber —" He jerked a thumb toward the deep. "Nice mess I've made of things."

The dory came up alongside. Ross had Hank and the two fishermen examined the streak of broken rock where the bomber had crashed, so that they could attest to the catastrophe. But Hank said there was no need of that; he had been an eyewitness.

"Perfect bird's-eye view from the parachute," said Hank. "I saw you straightening out just as you hit. And the explosion—umm—nice little flare-up. I said to myself, 'There goes old man Bradford.' Yep, it was beautiful."

"You've got a morbid sense of beauty," said Ross, getting into the dory. "I suppose you floated down with a notebook in your hand, writing a blow-by-blow account. Well, let's be off. Before the sun sets again, I'm going to account for that storm—or lose my socks trying."

"You'll lose your socks," Hank said, "from all I can get out of these natives."

"What's *your* explanation?" Ross asked sharply, turning to first one and then the other of the rowers.

Neither of the seamen were inclined to give a very satisfactory answer. When you lived in Flinfiord, they said, you didn't try to explain things. You just took what came.

"But storms don't just spring up out of nowhere," Ross pursued. "There's got to be a cause for things like that."

Again the seamen shrugged.

"They don't talk much," said Hank. "I think it's a Flinfiord trait."

HANK had been lucky enough to parachute down to the northern point of the island, he said. The lower winds had carried him in. The rest of the night he'd spent untangling himself from the parachute cord—that and knocking at natives' doors trying to stir out a rescue party for Ross.

"At first I thought they didn't speak English, they were so suspicious. They seem to be overfed on midnight rescues around here."

They rounded the northern point of the island and pushed toward the little fisherman's village that lay huddled along the west coast. The sun sifted through the morning mists. From the farther side of the island black and purple mountains rose against the morning sky like a magnificent backdrop under magic stage lights.

Ross pointed down the west coastline. At the southwestern point a high salient promontory reared dark and sheer. A cluster of castle-like buildings crowned it.

"That's where the fireworks came from," said Ross.

"And the warning," said Hank. "I took the trouble to inquire. There's a female radio ham up there."

Ross instructed the fishermen to row to that end of the island. The fishermen grumbled that it would make them late for breakfast. But breakfasts were the least of Ross' worries. This business of broadcasting warnings about storms, and suddenly following through by broadcasting the storm itself, could stand to be investigated. Ross reiterated that he intended to trace the matter down before he left this place.

"You'll probably run up a board bill," said Hank.

"I won't stay over more than a day or two," said Ross. "I'll just run up to that castle and take a look."

"Ummm?" Hank made a comical face. "That girl *did* have a nice voice."

"Shall I give her your regards, Hank, or will you come along?"

Hank wasn't ready to decide. He wouldn't mind seeing the girl. She might be just the heroine he needed for a story. But he'd hate to get mixed up in any more thunder and lightning.

The mention of thunder and lightning brought back Ross' heavy mood. Thousands of dollars and hours of work had gone into making that bomber and Uncle Sam had entrusted him to get it across. He was going to have some explaining to do.

"If it were a story, that castle would be some crack-brained scientists's experimental power station—"

Hank's eyes lighted. "Ah—a scientist and his daughter—"

"But more probably it's a Nazi outpost, set to destroy incoming bombers —"

"Wait till I get my notebook," said Hank. "Now—go on."

"Well, that's my best guess," said Ross. "It's some sort of war weapon."

Here one of the fishermen broke his silence. "The war's got nothing to do with it. That castle has sent out lightning and earthquakes for nine years."

AS they rowed closer, the perpendicular walls of the promontory rose tall and majestic before them. Most of the castle, high overhead, became obscured from view. Only the outer ends of the blue-stone wings could be seen, projecting to the cliff's edge. At one point a low wide porch extended out over empty space.

Ross' uplifted eyes swept the sheer five hundred foot drop to the crags jutting up out of the placid waters at the promontory base.

Then he saw the solitary figure of a

ragged man, lying on one of the crags with his hands locked under his shaggy head.

"Row over to that fellow," Ross instructed.

The fishermen protested. The crags were treacherous, they complained. Besides, that man was only a crazy, crippled beggar. But Ross insisted, and the dory threaded through the jutting rocks to the beggar's perch.

"Hi, there," Ross called to him. "What's your name?"

The ragged fellow turned his shaggy head and eyes. He spit a piece of seaweed out of his mouth and smeared his brown bony wrist across his whiskers. His leathery skin was as brown as the rock he was lying on.

"Name's Jimpson," he answered in a manner surprisingly pert. "What's yours?"

"Bradford. Do you live here?"

"Sure. I 've got a little cave up in the cliff. It ain't bad."

"What do you do?"

"Gather statistics. What do *you* do?"

"Pilot airplanes. I ran into some hard luck last night and lost a plane. These Flinfiord storms come up in a hurry."

"You said it," said Jimpson. He crawled down closer to the water's edge. His stiff back and twisted legs weren't much help, but he put his strong arms to good use. "What else do you do?"

Ross smiled. "I used to help run a big hotel for transients."

"That must be where I've seen you before," the fellow said casually. "I used to get around. Don't get around much any more."

"The fellow's batty," Hank whispered.

"I gotta keep on the job, gathering statistics," the fellow went on.

"What sort of statistics, Jimpson?" Ross asked.

Jimpson pointed upward. "See that porch? That's five hundred and fifty feet up. I don't figure more'n one man in a thousand that gets shoved off from up there could live through it the way I did. You see it's got to be high tide —"

"You *fell* from up there?" Ross narrowed an eye critically.

The fellow pointed at his legs. "That's how I got them."

ROSS stepped across to the rock, knelt down beside the man, and examined the crooked bones of his legs. "Too bad you couldn't have had them set, Jimpson. Not much good to you, are they?"

"You'd be surprised. They're as handy as mud chains. But as I was sayin'—statistics. The laws of improbability and such. I don't figure I'll live to see another man come through the way I did. You see, there's got to be a rough sea, and you've got to hit an awful big wave and hit just right, like landin' from a ski jump. I had uncanny good luck." Jimpson spit out another chunk of seaweed and squinted upward. "I always keep watch about this time of mornin'."

"Do you ever see anyone fall?" Ross asked.

"Seen a pretty goodly percent. Now and then I miss, but at least I see the body wash past *after* the fall. That keeps my statistics straight."

Ross looked across to Hank, who winked and motioned for him to come on. The fishermen were growing impatient. Ross turned back to the crippled beggar. "If what you say is true—"

"It is true, Bradford. I never lied to you."

Ross was struck by the fellow's oddly familiar manner.

"What in thunder goes on up in that castle?" Ross asked.

"That," said Jimpson, brushing his ragged whiskers and casting a scornful eye toward the fishermen, "is something I never discuss in the hearing of the public. Come back alone sometime, Bradford."

"I may do that, Jimpson. At least I'm going to hike up to that castle and see what it's all about. So long, and thanks."

Ross climbed down into the dory. He lifted a package of cigarettes and matches from Hank's pocket and tossed them back. Jimpson caught them and grinned.

The fishermen shoved off. Ross gave the fellow a final wave, and saw him shake his shaggy head as he called, "I wouldn't go up, if I was you. According to my statistics, it ain't healthy."

CHAPTER III

An Amazing Reception

"THE fellow's loony," Hank mumbled, as they pushed toward the village.

"Maybe," said Ross dubiously. "But there's something remarkable about him, living out there like a hermit, keeping up lively conversation with himself. There's a character for your notebook."

"I'd confine him to a comic section," said Hank. "How do you know he talks to himself?"

"By the way he talks. He keeps in practice. He probably reads the pedigree of every tight-lipped fisherman that rows past."

"Did you go for his story about his falling?"

"Yes," said Ross.

"How about his notion that he'd seen you before?"

"Could be. Thousands of homeless men were in and out of the Transient Hotel. All kinds of men, from beggars to millionaires incog. This Jimpson is obviously an American, probably a globe-trotting hobo before he got crippled up."

They landed at the village, paid off the fishermen, went directly to the office of the British agent. He was a curt young officer, almost as uncommunicative as the fishermen. He received Ross's story of the lost bomber without surprise. I'll cable your report," he said. "But my advice is, forget your proposed investigation."

"I can't do that," said Ross pointedly.

"Flinfiord folks know better than to dig up trouble over something they can't understand," said the agent. "Those storms are a common occurrence."

"I'd think *you'd* investigate," Ross snapped. "It's most likely a Nazi instrument of death."

"It began long before the war. Don't ask me what it is. For all I know, it's some hidden hell that breaks loose like a geyser. That castle is a kingdom unto itself as far as I'm concerned."

Ross waited in the office until the operator had transmitted his cablegram. That done, the young pilot was officially free. He dashed off a few letters to catch the first mail boat for England. Then he and Hank found a low-roofed tavern where fish foods were plentiful.

While they were eating, Hank spread a small piece of crumpled paper on the table. It was a cablegram blank, with a message partially written, spoiled and marked out.

"Picked it up in the wastebasket over at the agent's," said Hank. "Ducky feminine handwriting, isn't it?"

The message, dated the previous night, was addressed to a news association in the U.S.A. It read:

Still following that H K story over devious route. Left Japan four weeks ago. Trail led to Flinfiord, small island between England and Iceland. I think H K is nuts. He does not know where he is going or why. If he continues globe-trotting count on me to quit and jump the first boat for home —

At that point the writer had suddenly jerked the pen. Perhaps she had been startled by a crash of thunder or an earthquake jolt. At any rate she had discarded the message, not neglecting to scratch out a few of the key words.

"What about it?" Ross asked, throwing a question-mark expression at his turtle-like companion.

"They don't send crack reporters galloping around the world for nothing. If this female is still on the island, I'd better sharpen my pencil for a story."

Ross rose. "How about a hike up to the castle with me?"

"Sorry," said Hank. "I'm out to fill my notebook, and I've got a hunch this gal has a nose for news. If she grabs a boat, I'm gonna be on board."

Ross smiled. "You know you can't be sure a girl's good-looking just because she's a fancy handwriter."

Hank frowned at the crumpled message. "Dammit, Ross, she's *got* to be good-looking. Anyway, I'm gonna stick around the village. If you aren't back by night, I'll know that crippled beggar was telling the truth. I'll send the fishermen out to pick up your body. Have a good time, fellow."

They shook hands and parted company.

ROSS BRADFORD jogged along the upward trail at a leisurely pace. Whenever he came upon a native, he stopped for all the conversation he could get.

"You won't get in up there," said an old lady, working in her garden. That was all she would say. Ross moved on.

"They've got the place guarded," said a boy who was gathering wood. "Nobody ever goes up there except to deliver goods or take the mail—nobody, that is, except foreigners. And they usually get turned away."

"What foreigners?"

The boy said he didn't know—*any* foreigners, he guessed. Strangers were always coming to the island, he said. Sometimes they were black men, sometimes yellow men from the Orient, sometimes white people from Europe or one of the Americas. But regardless of their color they weren't wanted at the castle.

"What happens when they fail to get in?" Ross asked.

The boy shrugged. "Most of them sail back home, I guess. A few of them build houses and settle down over on the east side of the island. They're an awful mess, always fighting and stealing, and talking all kinds of foreign languages. They stole a boat from my dad one time."

Ross shook his head, thanked the boy, and hiked on. It was a confusing picture—that innocent-looking, blue-stone castle expanding magnificently before him.

To the eye it was the crowning beauty spot of the mountainous island.

But to the villagers it was a source of bad weather and earthquakes that had to be tolerated, and a magnet for troublesome foreigners from all over the world.

To the British agent it was a bit of runaway hell, not to be dealt with on the same terms as Nazi war weapons.

To Hank it had been the source of a soft, plaintive radio voice.

To the crippled beggar named Jimpson it was a jump-off to death.

To Ross himself it was something mystical, unconquered, u n k n o w n ; something terrifically challenging. It

was the source of a weird vision of two evil eyes, glaring—all the way down through that swift dive—the vision that Ross had expected to be the last earthly sight his eyes would see.

The trail dipped downward into the bed of a dashing mountain stream. Here the action of earthquakes was conspicuous. The bridge of former years had been reduced to a ford of broken masonry. Ross stopped, drank, removed his puttees, shoes and socks, and bathed his feet in the cool water.

WHILE he rested, turning matters over in his mind, he looked up to see a small caravan of pack animals coming down to the river from the opposite direction. The driver, after watering his beasts, came over to Ross, greeted him genially.

Once more Ross was to get a preview of the castle mysteries. At first he did not realize that this man's story was to give him a radically different slant.

"It's only another half mile up the mountainside," said the driver, on learning of Ross' mission. "But you won't be able to get in."

"Isn't there any other way except past the guards?" Ross asked.

"There's no other approach."

The driver got down on his knees and sketched a map of the island in the dust.

"You see, Flinfiord is shaped like an English lady's high-heeled shoe. The village lies to the north on the pointed toe. There's a second village —a settlement of foreign rapscallions—over here on the east, about where the shoe laces begin. Then here's all your mountains rising over the uppers. And down here at the southwest corner is the high heel. That's the promontory with the castle. Steep on three sides."

Ross nodded. "And this river?"

"It comes down from the mountains, cuts a canyon past the promontory, and winds on down to the sea right at the instep of the shoe—a half mile or so below this old bridge."

"You know your island pretty well," Ross commented.

"Ought to. I've peddled groceries around it all my life."

"Then you know all about these electric storms and quakes?"

The driver drew himself up defensively. "That's something we island folks don't talk much about. But I can set you right on *one* thing."

He drew a pipe out of his pocket, tapped it against a rock, gestured decisively by pointing toward the bit of castle turret that could be seen against the afternoon sky.

"Old Bill Graygortch, the man who owns that estate, *never died*," he said. "Anyone that tries to tell you different is off his facts."

"Nobody has told me anything about old Bill Graygortch," said Ross.

"He's still up there, and he's still rich enough to buy more supplies than all the rest of the island. I ought to know. Of course, I don't often see him any more, but I get to talk with his servants. The gongs still ring whenever he climbs the stairs to his top turret. They ring pretty far apart, now, because he's getting so feeble. But that half-witted fellow down in the village who claims he helped dig old Bill Graygorch's grave and saw him dead and buried is a damned liar."

The driver's speech rose to a vengeful outburst and stopped quite suddenly. He swung his whips at the dusty backs of his pack animals. The caravan went on its way.

ROSS crossed the stream, put on socks, shoes and puttees, and began the last half mile of his ascent.

Within a few minutes the massive blue-stone architecture was hovering

over him from the promontory's crest. The trail narrowed through a short canyon of hewn walls. The narrow pass led to an open gateway of bolted logs.

On the crossbeam letters had been cut to spell the single word, GRAYGORTCH.

Ross passed through the gateway, then stopped. A clearing half as large as a football gridiron lay between him and the castle entrance. The clearing was very much occupied. Some sort of game was in progress, with ten or twelve uniformed men participating.

"English sailors!" Ross thought, for such were the uniforms the players wore. "No—these must be the guards." The court was walled in with high bolted log walls. It was, in fact, the promenade of these guardsmen. The game, having no spectators, was obviously only a pastime.

"Guardsmen's hockey," Ross grinned to himself, for by this time he perceived that there were two teams in combat, each trying to club the rubber dummy to a goal.

The rubber dummy bounced about with rubber-ball agility. In form it resembled a man, except for the absence of a head and part of an arm, which had evidently been battered off in the course of the dummy's service.

"Nice grim game," Ross thought. "Those boys keep in practice."

He squinted his eyes against the dust of battle, noting the hearty violence with which the men swung their heavy wooden clubs. He was somehow reminded, at that moment, that he had come here without any weapons. His own revolver had gone down with the bomber. He carried a small packet of miniature tools, a fountain-pen flashlight, a pocket knife—nothing that gave him any satisfaction to reflect upon.

He had taken the trouble, at the fishermen's tavern, to inquire about purchasing firearms, and had been assured that no such articles could be had except by mail order. So he had come on unarmed.

Now the dummy bounced toward his side of the court and the players came toward him on the run. Someone shouted, "Hey!" and the game came to a dead stop. All twelve of the panting, sweating guards were looking at Ross Bradford. A few of them began to smile, and there was low mumbling.

One of them picked up the rubber dummy and hurled it to the nearest corner of the court where it lay, out of way. Then the guards moved toward Ross.

They advanced in a front less regular than military formation—something a shade better than a mob front. Ross stood well inside the gateway and waited. They came within four yards and stopped.

"Check it," one of them said, flinging the palm of his hand back at the others as he stepped forward. "I've got this."

For the space of not more than five seconds his eyes made a dozen quick sweeps of Ross from head to foot. His smile was full of projecting upper teeth.

"You've come in good time," he said. "But Graygortch was beginning to worry. Follow me. I'll introduce you to the girl at once."

The other guards moved aside. Ross and his escort marched across the promenade and into the main entrance of the castle.

CHAPTER IV

Prospective Bridegroom

ROSS BRADFORD'S heart jumped up into his throat and hung there. Each time the guard led him up another stairs to a higher level a faint musical *bling!* would sound from some adjacent wall, like a clock striking half-past.

With every *bling* Ross' heart took another jump. Obviously any castle so well equipped with electric eyes that it registered your every ascent or descent or turn of a corner, could be equally well supplied with trapdoors and iron bars. Ross began to wish for a nice safe cell that would give time to catch his directions. This place was a maze. He was certainly being taken prisoner.

"Back this way," the guard hissed, shoving him into an alcove. Ross thought, here it comes.

But no bars fell. Instead, heavy footsteps pounded along the stone floor and in a moment Ross got a glimpse of the man as he walked past. The man was huge, he was as well dressed as an English lord, he carried one shoulder a trifle higher than the other, he had a thick brutal face. Somehow on first glimpse he made Ross think of a movie gangster on dress parade.

Obviously the guard had preferred to dodge this man. The footsteps waned, the guard and Ross proceeded on their way.

"Graygortch?" Ross asked.

The guard laughed. "That was Rouse. He's your natural enemy. He doesn't know you're here, and we won't disturb him with the news just yet."

"My natural enemy, huh?" Ross echoed. "I pick 'em big."

His comment didn't elicit any further explanation from the guard. The guard was busy whistling wisps of Schubert's Serenade through his teeth. Momentarily Ross was distracted from the dizzying maze of the elegant corridors and spacious halls by his escort's odd whistling mannerism.

"They call me Schubert," the guard said with a hint of pride in his smile, and went on whistling.

It was noticeable that he whistled without any visible adjustment of his lips or jaws, for his upper teeth projected unduly and his mouth was constantly open. The motionless starting and stopping of tunes, together with the half-smile that hung at the corners of his lips, somehow helped to make him a curiosity not to be too quickly typed. There was at once a mysterious good humor, a friendliness, and a sly cunning about him.

He stopped whistling and spoke in a guarded tone. "You want to see Graygortch? There he is."

"Where?"

They were crossing a circular hallway that reminded Ross of a state capitol rotunda.

Schubert pointed down a dim dead-end passage. "That shadow," he said. *"That's* Graygortch."

ROSS saw the silhouetted profile of a face slanted into misproportions across the end wall of the passage. There was no discernable movement to the shadow. It could have been made by hanging a mask on a chair and setting a spotlight back of it.

"He's in his study," said Schubert. "Tread lightly."

They moved on to another section of the castle, crossed through the dining room, paused at a kitchen where a vixen of a cook was screaming her hardboiled orders at a corps of maids. Schubert looked in.

"There'll be an extra, beginning tonight, Fantella."

"Vot's dot?" the cook snorted, bristling for a fight. "Rouse didn't order extra."

"I'm ordering it, see," said Schubert. "This is Graygortch's own guest."

"Yah?" Fantella sniffed. "Vot an important sailor *you* got ter be, Meester Schubert, makin' guests for Meester Graygortch. Rouse vill dumbust you ofer der head some day."

"Where's Vivian, Fantella?"

The irate cook slapped a wooden spoon down on an iron table. "Don't you go upsetting dot girl mit no more zurprise guests. I'll dumbust you ofer der head myself."

"Where is she? In her play room? Graygortch ordered me to—"

"Graygortch! Graygortch!" Her fat cheeks shuddered. "Vot is he coming to? For nine years I haf said he vos der same old Bill Graygortch as always, only for being a leetle seek. But dese last weeks, mine Gott! You know what I tink?"

"What do you think?"

"I tink he hears too much war. He reads too many speeches of der terrible Hitler. Listens to too much radio. It's making him into a maniacter vot feeds on thunder and lightning. Mine Gott! Better he should have died!"

A teasing whistle escaped the guard's teeth. "Mercy, what a temper, Fantella. What's worse, Vivian is growing up to be just like you."

"Fah! I don't talk to fresh sailors like you!" The old lady whirled and stormed away.

By this time Ross had gathered that all guards were referred to as sailors because of their uniforms. The uniforms had doubtless been secured by some unethical means, for this private estate certainly had no connection with the British Navy. Rather it was a little secluded independent state—a law unto itself.

"Here we are at last," said Schubert with an ingratiating gesture.

THEY stopped near an oddly shaped doorway. It was no more than three feet high, reminding Ross of something out of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Schubert explained in a low voice that this had been Vivian's play room ever since she was a child.

"It's still her play room," he said. "She's not very sociable. She shrinks from people. This is her favorite retreat. Come on in and meet her."

"No, thanks."

"Huh?" Schubert blinked at Ross with a mysterious twinkle. "What's the matter? Bashful?"

"Certainly not."

"I don't know how far you've come from," Schubert said, still studying Ross curiously, "but I know *why* you've come. You're one of Graygortch's candidates. You must be a little bit curious to see the girl you hope to marry—or aren't you?"

"Marry?" Ross echoed the word without meaning to. "Yes—er—of course. That is—"

"You don't have to keep it secret from me," said Schubert. "It's Rouse you've got to watch. He doesn't know. That's why I'll have to keep you hid, along with the other candidates. But time's growing short. The old man's getting too feeble to last much longer."

Ross took a deep breath and pressed his fingers against the wooden wall behind him just for the satisfaction of clinging to something solid. Only a few minutes earlier, when he had crashed the castle gate, he had wished for a weapon. Now what he needed was pills to counteract dizziness.

"This way," said Schubert, pointing to the playroom door.

"No, thanks," said Ross. "If that room is her private retreat, I wouldn't think of intruding."

"Oh. Formalities, eh?" Schubert spoke with a note of taunt. "I'll bring her out."

The guard knelt down, opened the door, and went in. Ross waited in the corridor.

"Get out! Get out!" a girlish voice cried. Schubert's voice mocked her outburst, and there followed an explosive battle of epithets and taunts. The

quarrel came closer to the little door.

Ross backed away, for toy dishes and pans and wooden dolls were flying out of the playroom. Then Schubert appeared, crawling out backward on his knees, protecting his face with one hand, dragging the girl out with the other.

"You've got company, I tell you," he cackled between blows of a toy rolling pin that she swung at his head. "Allow me to introduce—"

BY this time the girl was out under the light of the corridor, still sitting on her knees but no longer swinging weapons, for a sideward glance had told her a stranger was present. She continued to look daggers at Schubert, and her snappy black eyes, Ross noted, possessed a high dagger-looking potential. With a haughty twist she shook her red jacket closer around her shoulders.

"For the last time, Schubert," she snapped heatedly, "if you ever come into this room again there's going to be trouble. I'm warning you—"

"But Vivian—Miss Graygortch, I've brought you—"

"You can telephone me if you want me. Just remember that."

"Not about this. Your Uncle Graygortch wants it kept quiet. He said bring the candidates straight to you, then hide them—"

"You and your candidates!" The girl bit her words angrily. "You're nothing but thieves and cutthroats. All of you!" She turned on Ross and faced him squarely for the first time. "That goes for you too."

The daggers of her eyes held on Ross' weather-beaten face. Her saucy lips twitched slightly as she glanced at his wind-ruffled hair, the straight lines of his eyebrows, thin lips and jaw. Automatically her hand rose to brush back her own uncombed hair that had fallen over her shoulder in disarray.

"Consider the introduction complete," Schubert cracked, "but you might tell us your name, fellow."

"Ross Bradford." He continued to look at the girl steadily. For all her ire, she was young and pretty. Her eyes were large, her lips almost childlike.

Though her spitfire anger had suddenly subsided in spite of herself, she managed a cynical tone of voice.

"You're one of these proud Americans, aren't you? You're going to tell me you've come all the way across the ocean to marry me. You're going to tell me what a great fellow you are. I know. You can just skip that line. All I want to know is what kind of criminal are you, really?"

"We'd better get this straight," said Ross coldly. "I didn't come here to marry you. What's more, if I had, I'd change my mind. That's all. I'm sorry we bothered you."

Ross struck off down the hall, leaving Schubert and the girl to gape after him. "Schubert," the girl whispered breathlessly.

"What is it?"

"Bring him back to me after supper. I want to talk with him."

CHAPTER V

Another Storm

ROSS BRADFORD had walked off abruptly on purpose. It had seemed a good idea at the time. He couldn't have stayed without tangling himself up in a quarrel, and he was uncertain how far a tangle could go around here without someone's getting hanged. Or bounced off an overhanging porch.

But as he walked away, followed by the ever alert Schubert, he was mentally kicking himself. For once he wished he'd been born clever instead of honest.

As far as that young female spitfire was concerned, it was best that he should say exactly what he did say. If there was a marriage in the offing and she was sorting over the prizes, he wasn't in the running. Nothing could be farther from his business.

However, if he had been unscrupulous enough to pounce on his advantages, he should have said, "Lady, I'm your man." Then after a few smiles and a false kiss or two in the moonlight he could begin to quiz her about things that mattered: What was the meaning of these storms? What were the secrets of this stupendous power that leaped out over the ocean? What was her uncle's game—and what was her share in it?

These were Ross Bradford's unanswerables. As soon as Schubert led him to a room and went whistling away, the bewildered pilot dropped down on a cot and tried to recount his experiences In a few minutes he was asleep.

Fantella knocked at his door and came in with a tray of food. He looked up drowsily and told her to put it down. He would eat later.

"I got a message vor you, Meester Bradford. Dot sailor Schubert said to tell you der conference mit der girl iss postponed. You gotta stay right here till der suspicions blow ofer. Meester Rouse smells a rotten turnip."

"Thanks, Fantella. I'll stay."

After that Ross was left to himself for the night.

Toward morning he awakened out of a dream of electric storms and death-dives.

At first he couldn't remember where he was. A faint gray of approaching dawn tinged the rough window encasements. A fresh breeze was sailing in from the west. His thoughts cleared. All the mysteries of his recent hours loomed up like ghosts. He wished Hank Switcher were here. He needed someone to talk with. But Hank was probably steaming back for the States.

Ross drank in the breeze at the west window. There was something eerie about looking out upon the rambling walls of the castle, black against the starlit blue. Everything was so silent and mysterious. The only sounds were the low ceaseless sloshings of restless waves five hundred feet below.

"They've put me off in a corner by myself." Ross muttered, crossing to a south window. "I'll never learn anything as long as I stay here."

BUT Ross Bradford stayed all of that day like a model prisoner. By nightfall he was not an iota ahead of the day's starting point. He had seen no one except the cook. She had refused to stop and talk.

It was early the next morning that he looked down out of his south window to discover the weird figure of a man fighting his way upward along the nearly perpendicular wall. Under the shroud of early morning twilight the man's features were indistinguishable. But Ross Bradford knew the man was Jimpson, the crippled beggar.

He ascended by a zig-zag trail, and his swift sure motions proved that he knew every inch of his way. Ross guessed that he had built the trail himself. It was replete with concealed ledges, carved hand holds, and stretches of rope anchored so tightly along the wall that they could rarely be seen.

Jimpson came on, plying his way with powerful bare arms, giving an extra shove here and there with his twisted legs. Somehow it did Ross Bradford good to see the unfortunate fellow put up such a valiant scrap. Whatever his game, the Fates hadn't downed him.

At last he was up to the lower level

of the castle itself, directly beneath Bradford's window.

He climbed upon the small porch noiselessly, yet not in the manner of a sneak. He clung close to the rail. He picked up something and began to eat.

Ross Bradford smiled to himself. This was the porch from which Fantella's maids dumped the kitchen garbage. But Jimpson, as Ross rightly guessed, was not eating unclean food. Someone in the kitchen force had conspired to leave a package of edibles for him.

Another day passed. With the night's darkness and the new dawn Ross Bradford was able to verify his guess. Fantella herself was the other party to this little intrigue. Late at night she would plant the package of food near the porch railing. By early dawn Jimpson would ascend, eat his fill, tie a package of food to his belt, and make his way back down the wall.

Bradford chuckled at his discovery. It wasn't much, compared to the vast mysteries that loomed over the Graygortch castle, but it was something.

The more Bradford pondered it, the more meanings he derived. He was convinced, now, that Jimpson had once been a member of this household. Yes, Jimpson had been literally kicked out – for what reason? Well, maybe it didn't take much reason to get kicked out of this place. At any rate Fantella did not hold any grudges against the fellow. And she was an old-timer here, still bearing the torch for old Bill Graygortch's honor and respecability.

Fantella, certainly, was on the right side of the ledger. For all her hard-boiled vixenish manners and her funny German accent, she was solid and good-hearted and honest.

"But where does that get me?" Ross Bradford asked himself, pacing the floor restlessly. "If I don't get out of here I'm nothing but a turkey waiting for Thanksgiving."

A strain of Schubert's Serenade came down the hallway, and the smiling toothy guard breezed in. "How's it going, pal? Had any visitors?"

"Not even a mouse."

"You ought to carry a deck of cards." Schubert looked sharply at Ross' pockets. "You travel light, don't you?"

"I ought to have a portable radio," said Ross. "Are there any broadcasting stations around here?"

"Hell, if you want music," said Schubert, "I can play you any tune you can name. Just give me a fiddle—"

"I wasn't thinking of music," said Ross. "I like to listen in on these ham stations. Do you know of any such—"

"That's outa my line," said Schubert. "The hams are probably all shut down for the war. Well, pal, tonight you get to step out."

ROSS nodded absently. He was still thinking of the radio. Was it possible that Schubert and other occupants of this castle didn't know that a ham station was operated from this point?

"Cheer up, pal. This is the start of your social season. Rouse'll be busy looking after the old man tonight, so it's your chance to promenade. She said she'd drop around for you after supper."

"Vivian?"

"Who'd you think—Fantella? Or one of the maids?"

"If it's all the same," said Ross, "I'd like a conference with Graygortch."

"That'll come later," said Schubert. "And speak that name with reverence, my friend." He whistled off down the corridors. . . .

That evening, before Fantella had come to take Ross' supper dishes away, he looked up to see Vivian standing in the doorway.

"Come in," he said, switching his eyes back to his food to keep from noticing how devilishly beautiful she was.

She sauntered across the room, scanning the walls and floors.

"Cobwebs," she said. "What a frightful room Schubert gave you.

"On the contrary," said Ross, "it's very pleasant. I have two oceans, one on the south, one on the west."

"But you must have found these walls very depressing. You've been here three days." She paused at a window. The breeze fluttered across her silk blouse. "You weren't tempted to jump out?"

Ross laughed. "I was waiting for a higher tide. By the way, your musical guard said a promenade might be in order."

He went over to her and offered his arm in the attitude of a prisoner fulfilling an obligation. The girl ignored the arm, countering with a slightly puzzled smile. She led the way down a series of corridors to an open porch. She was scarcely the sophisticated type, thought Ross. Nor was there much of the spitfire about her at the moment, though he hadn't forgotten that she could hurl toy crockery if the occasion demanded.

"You like living here?" he asked.

Her eyelids flicked upward. "Why did you ask that?"

"I didn't suppose I was breaking in on any secret, just asking you how you liked—"

"I've lived here all my life," she said.

Ross shook his head. "That's a technical error. Most of your life is yet to be lived."

"You like to argue, don't you?"

"On the contrary, I—"

Ross saw that she was laughing at him. She was simply a little girl.

"Every time I say something," she teased, "you say 'On the contrary.' That proves you like to argue."

"All right, I'll swear off arguing," Ross smiled, "and we'll carry on a peaceful, harmless little conversation. What shall we talk about?"

"What do people usually talk about, back in America?"

"The weather's always a good topic," said Ross. "When do you think we'll have another storm?"

The girl tossed her head saucily, and her eyes flicked toward the tallest tower that reared above the castle roofs. "I don't like to talk about storms."

HER friendly manner had suddenly become cool, and Ross knew he had lost ground. He went on casually.

"Another thing people always like to talk about is their operations. Very cheery topic in America. If you've had a complicated operation you can be an interesting conversationalist. Operations, they say, have made talk ever since Adam."

"Adam?" she said absently.

"In the Bible—you know. Adam got more conversation out of an operation than anybody. Good joke, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Vivian, looking at him as if she hadn't heard a word. She was studying him, trying to penetrate his mask. "You arrived here three days ago, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have been on this island the night of the last storm."

"I was flying over," said Ross. "It caught me."

"Oh?" Her dark eyes were intent.

"I heard your voice that night on my radio. It *was* you, wasn't it?"

Vivian nodded. "The storms are so terrible. I try to send out warnings. I never know whether they do any good. Not many people on the Flinfiord have radios. But I have to do *something*. I can't just sit quietly in my room when I know that there's danger and death

—but why talk about it?"

The careless tone with which she concluded her words left Ross wondering. She walked past him and sauntered along the log railing of the long winding porch. He stood watching her for a few seconds, muttering to himself that she was either darned innocent or darned clever.

No, the radio warnings left no doubt. She was as innocent as her childlike manner betrayed. That would make things doubly difficult, for Ross was going to have to be clever.

Yes, clever and ruthless, and violent, if necessary—let lives or hearts fall where they might.

But for one brief moment Ross Bradford shut these thoughts out. Before him was a breath-taking picture—a wide ocean, a vast sky just blue enough to show off two or three bright evening stars, a soft sea breeze, castle walls and turrets—all this and a beautiful girl.

He walked over to stand beside her, his shoulder barely touching hers.

"Your voice on the radio that night," he said, "is something I could never forget—even if I hadn't seen you."

"Are you trying to be sentimental?" she asked without smiling.

"I'm simply straightening out my opinion of you," he said. "Don't forget that the first time I saw you, you were throwing things. That's what got me off the track. But the way I've got you figured out, you're all right—on things that matter."

"And what things matter?"

"Storms," said Ross. "I've got a hunch they've got some meaning—something more than shaking houses and knocking down bombers and upsetting ships. But it's none of your guilt. That much I'm sure of."

"You take a lot of pride in getting me all figured out, don't you?" Again there was a note of half-suppressed distrust in her voice.

IT was a note that Ross chose to disregard. Yes, he liked to figure people out, he said. He'd had a lot of practice, especially at the hotel for transients, where he had met every type of person imaginable.

He talked on, and Vivian sat beside him watching him, as the darkening sky deepened the lines of his face. His easy friendly way was disarming, disturbingly so.

But to Vivian Graygortch this man was a stranger, and no stranger was to be trusted. For her that was the first rule of life. The men who came to Flinfiord to knock at the gates of Graygortch castle were men who lied and cheated.

And so, as they sat talking, Vivian Graygortch refused to relax her suspicions. If in a heedless moment she was tempted to sink into reverie, some reminder would bring her back –the sight of a passing guard, the sound of a bell, or a wisp of whistled Schubert air from farther down the winding porch.

A deep-throated gong sounded.

Ross sprang up to gaze curiously at the tallest tower, from which the heavy musical note sang out. The porch floor vibrated against his feet.

As the note resounded away, Vivian's hurried footsteps penetrated his consciousness. She had crossed the porch to the nearest door. She had left him without a word, but now she turned her head and motioned him to follow.

She fairly ran through the hallway, Ross at her heels.

They passed a group of seven or eight sailors who were striding along in the other direction, a second group that were busy moving some furniture back against the walls. Everybody had come to life at the sound of the gong. Every-

body was on the move.

Schubert zipped past, whistling in double tempo. He waved but didn't stop to speak. Pounding footsteps and sounds of moving furniture came from everywhere.

"Keep back!"

Vivian uttered the words with a gasp of breath. She stopped short, caught Ross by the hand. Just ahead was the elegant, lavender-hued circular hallway, the converging point of several halls and stairs.

"We don't want to bump into Rouse," Vivian whispered. "We haven't time to explain."

"Explain what?" Ross asked.

"You."

Ross caught the gleam of danger in her eyes as they flashed on him for an instant. She added, "This South Pole plaza—" she indicated the big circular hallway—"is the worst place in the castle for running into folks."

Ross smiled to himself. What the furor was all about he didn't know, but he felt like Mary's little lamb, standing here in the semi-darkness with Vivian Graygortch clutching his hand. A few servants crossed and recrossed the circular hallway, busying themselves with removing pictures from the walls and packing them away in shelves. Occasionally they would glance upward into the lavender light—light that apparently sifted down from the vast open tower overhead.

"What is this?" Ross mumbled. "Moving day?"

Another gong sounded. The "South Pole" rang through and through with the deep resounding note.

"That was a different chime," Ross whispered. "The first one was a perfect middle C. This one came up to D."

"That means Uncle Graygortch is on the second landing," Vivian breathed. "He's climbing the tower. There'll be six more gongs—I must hurry!"

SHE dropped Ross's hand and struck out across the South Pole plaza. Again he followed. Full under the lavender lights he cut squarely across the path of Rouse.

The heavy man, pacing toward a staircase, gave a sudden thrust of his high shoulder and threw Ross a challenging glare. On the instant Ross cut away from Vivian's shadow and made tracks toward the nearest wall. If Rouse's glare meant danger, there was no use letting Vivian get involved.

Ross had his wits about him. He began to remove a picture from the wall, as the other servants were doing. He watched the reflection of the husky man in the picture glass. Rouse paused only for a second, then went on his way. A moment later Ross had rejoined Vivian.

"That was quick thinking, Mr. Bradford," she whispered. "My compliments."

"I know the way back to my corner room from here," he told her.

"You'd better come with me," Vivian advised. "You've just had a close call."

By the time the third gong rang out with the next upward tone of the scale, Ross was in a room where he could hardly hear it. Vivian's childhood playroom had been equipped with sound insulation that absorbed all but the loudest castle noises.

Ross sat on a bearskin rug in one corner of the little room. Across from him was the curiously designed three-foot door—securely locked from the inside.

In another corner of the room sat Vivian, leaning forward in a tense half-crouched position from her small rocking-chair. Her face was outlined with light from glowing radio tubes. Her girl-

ish lips were close to the silvery microphone. Her voice was low, throbbing.

"A storm is about to break . . . Fishermen . . . Travelers . . . Take warning . . . Storm over the Flinfiord. . . ."

A few minutes later the dim echoes of the eighth and last gong died away.

Vivian was still at the microphone. Ross was watching her, drinking in her words, her exciting beauty—

Suddenly the lights of the radio tubes were blacked out. The little room was total darkness. The floor rocked and shuddered. Through the insulated walls came the hard irresistible percussions of earthquake and storm and electrical fury.

Then out of the blackness Ross saw that weird unbelievable something he had seen before—a pair of strangely hypnotizing eyes, fiery with evil—glaring—coming closer—closer — closer—

CHAPTER VI

Hank Kills a Man

HANK SWITCHER released the left oar, looked tenderly at the palm of his hand, and said, "It busted."

"Good," said the girl sitting in the stern "Is that the last one?"

Hank nodded. "Sixth and last."

"Then you can forget about them."

"Did you ever row a boat with a handful of busted blisters and forget about them? Besides, I'll have some new ones by the time we get back."

They slipped along through the gray morning fog that screened all but the nearest surfaces of the promontory. The rowboat scraped the edges of the rock wall.

"I don't see any floating bodies," said the girl cheerfully. "What was your friend, blonde or brunette?"

"You'll know him if you see him," Hank grunted. "He looks like a movie hero."

"I'd like to meet him," said the girl, "preferably *before* he falls from the cliff."

"It's been four days since he struck out," said Hank. "I've a notion by this time he wouldn't mind meeting someone from America—even if her name was Sue Smith."

Susan Smith retorted with a saccharine smile. "If you think he might come swooping down, I'll put makeup on."

She touched a comb to the ends of her yellow hair beneath her jaunty tan felt hat, glancing at the effect in a small mirror. She rarely bothered to add any rouge to her cheeks. Her recent air and sea voyages had given her a strong healthy color that went well with her tailored tan suit.

"Hi, there!" Hank shouted into the fog. "Oh, Jimpson! . . . Are you there?"

Susan Smith arched an eyebrow. "Does this place give curb service? I'll take a large cherry coke."

"Jimpson!" Hank shouted. A minute or so later an answer came back out of the opaque gray. Then the ragged figure emerged, his bony twisted legs dragging along over the rocks. His bright eyes, as Susan Smith mentioned afterward, were practically luminous.

"You remember me, Jimpson? I rowed out the other morning with Ross Bradford."

"Four days ago," said Jimpson pertly.

"Right," said Hank. "I've been thinking over what you said about—er—statistics. Have there been any—"

"No statistics since I saw you, Mr. Switcher."

"He's a smart one," Sue whispered. "Anyone that can say statistics and not muff it—"

HER whisper was drowned out by a surprised ejaculation from Hank

Switcher. "Wait a minute, Jimpson. How'd you know my name was Switcher?"

"I had a communication from Mr. Bradford this morning. He dropped me a note on a string. He said if you were still on the Flinfiord you'd be coming around to inquire for him. If you did, I was to tell you not to wait because he might remain here for some time."

"Some time, huh?" Hank pursed his lips. "That's not too definite."

"He also said that if you had any intentions of coming to the castle, don't do it."

"Why not?"

"He didn't say."

"Sounds to me like he's in trouble," Hank groaned. "All this business about staying away from the castle—it's a sure sign something's wrong up there. Jimpson, can you get a message back to him?"

"If he lets a string down for me."

Hank frowned. His suspicions of four days ago that this poor creature was crazy returned in full force. This talk was simply a pack of lies from a demented mind. Where would Ross Bradford get a string that would reach down five hundred feet? Still, Jimpson had got the name Switcher from somewhere—

"Do you still have Bradford's note?" Hank asked.

"The wind blew it out of my hand," said Jimpson, spreading his fingers guiltily.

Sue bent over toward Hank. "Ask him what he knows about the castle. Does he think your friend is in trouble?"

Hank relayed the questions.

Jimpson's answers were evasive. He said he'd dropped out of the castle's social whirl several years ago. But he was still close enough to know when storms were brewing, and there had been a pretty good one last night.

"Yes, we heard the storm," said Sue. "They probably heard it all the way to Iceland."

Jimpson grinned. "Yep, it was a good one. Every one is better than the last. Well, take my word for it, where there are storms, there's trouble."

Sue nodded slowly. "Trouble."

Hank handed the crippled man a pencil and some blank pages out of his notebook. "If you get a chance, tell Bradford I'm coming up there to help him out. Sorry you can't come along, Jimpson."

"I'll stay here and gather statistics," said Jimpson.

HANK applied his six raw blisters to the oars. When well out of hearing he said to Sue, "What did you make of him?"

"Smart. Too smart to waste his life hermitting. He may have some good reason for staying there."

"I don't know what it would be," said Hank.

"He must have some drive that keeps him going," said Sue. "Otherwise he'd go to pot creeping around on stone walls like a box-elder bug. . . . When do you hit the trail for the castle, Hank?"

"After lunch."

"Wait till tomorrow morning and I'll ride with you—assuming that we don't have another storm tonight and Exhibit A of my H. K. case doesn't have another fit."

There was no storm that night, but Susan Smith was in a stormy mood when she met Hank at the tavern for breakfast the following morning. The Japanese—Exhibit A of her "H. K." case—had left his rooming quarters sometime during the night.

"Don't think I'm going to let him get away, after following him all the way from Japan," she said.

"He'd have to be a Houdini to get away from you. Any clues?"

"Don't think I'll need any," said Sue. "There haven't been any outgoing boats in the night, and this island's no bigger than a weed patch on a Texas ranch. Ten to one we'll pick up his trail on the way to the castle."

The other possibility, as Hank suggested, was that he had gone over to the other village on the east side of the island. These fishermen weren't too cordial to foreigners, no matter what their color. The wonder was that this Japanese had been able to get a lodging here in the first place. It must have been his superb manner—together with the wide curved sword he carried so conspicuously at his side.

Hardly anyone but Susan Smith knew that Exhibit A had been the organizer of a chain of suicide plots back in Japan before he had yielded to some strange urge to travel the globe. No one but herself, her news agency associates, and a few chance confidants such as Hank Switcher, knew that this Japanese was being followed, studied, written up as one of the most phenomenal case histories of modern journalism.

This was Susan Smith's job—to take this king of hara-kiris apart and see what made him tick.

What an assignment! Hank Switcher was all hot coals with jealousy when he first heard about it. Why couldn't *he* ever stumble onto a story like that? He never had any luck. Here he'd been on his way over to get a bird's-eye of the big European scrap, and he'd had to bog down on this fly speck of an island. And all he'd got so far was a snail's-eye view of a five-hundred foot promontory. Which added up to nothing more than a black question mark in his notebook.

The main things he'd bumped into that furnished story notes were two good earthquakes.

Three, counting Susan Smith.

Hank had filled fourteen pages with notes on Susan Smith. He'd soon need more notebooks. Especially now that he'd got into Sue's confidence and learned about her big assignment of dissecting a hara-kiri king.

THEY tramped along the upward trail, watching for foottracks. Soon they knew they were following in the wake of the Japanese. Yes, "H. K." had passed this way since the light sprinkling rain of last evening. His boottracks were well known by Susan. At one point she noted the marks of his sword where he had slipped along a steep grade. He must have been hurrying. No doubt he had wished to reach the castle before daylight.

"Yesterday it was my hands," said Hank, plodding along turtle-like a couple of steps behind the girl. "Today it'll be welts on my feet."

"You shouldn't be bothered, considering the welt you carry on your waistline," said Sue.

"That's muscle," said Hank. "I used to be a wrestler when I was down in Cuba."

"If you've been all the places you claim," said Sue, "you're ready for an old age pension. Do Cubans wrestle? I thought they hurled knives."

"Schucks, I always took their knives away from them and made them play my way," said Hank grinning proudly. He wasn't exactly lying. His writer's imagination told him it *could* have happened that way—*if* he had gone to Cuba.

"You're gonna be a handy man to have around," said Sue. "This H. K. has a mean disposition, and if he should draw his sword and show signs of being unsociable—"

"Wait a minute," said Hank. "I

haven't wrestled for a couple of years. I'm rusty—"

"That's all right. So's his sword," said Sue.

They forded the Flinfiord river and ascended through morning mists. A short climb through the upper reaches of the canyon lay between them and the castle. Sun glinted against its towers.

"Suppose we'd bump into the Japanese?" said Hank, feeling slightly pale.

"It's exactly what I expect," said Sue. "From all reports, everyone who approaches this place is turned away—your friend Bradford being a strange exception. If they've turned H. K. away, he'll have to come back down this trail."

Hank began to study tree trunks and rocks that might conceal one Japanese carrying one sword.

"Did you ever carry a gun?" asked Sue, reaching into her handbag.

"Sure. When I was running a filling station in Orange, New Jersey –what's this?" He blinked at the small pearl handled pistol she forced in his hands.

"I carry it for a companion," she said.

"Is it well behaved?" Hank asked, looking down the barrel to see if he could see the bullet.

"It's never spoken out of turn yet," said Sue. "But so often when Mr. H. K. and I meet we run low on conversation and my hands get nervous. On that last plane hop we made together it was pretty bad. I was really on the spot that time."

"How do you mean?"

IN answer Sue related a few of her contacts with the Japanese. In Japan she had eavesdropped on his secret meetings. She had heard him pledge several of his countrymen to commit hara-kiri if their political program was overridden. Next he had gone to their political enemies and enlisted *them* in the same tradition. His furious crusades had forced several hundreds of tradition-steeped Japanese to rip their own bellies open.

Then one day, when his suicide trade had reached what, in more genteel business, would be called the peak of prosperity, Mr. Hinko, the king of hara-kiri, yielded to some mysterious urge to travel.

Sue, who by that time had been shadowing him for weeks, had suddenly changed her tactics. She had taken passage on his boat, made acquaintance with him as a fellow tourist, tried to gain his confidence and probe his secrets. Eventually she had been convinced that *Hinko did not know why he was traveling westward.*

The admission of this fact had hurt his pride. He had thereafter shunned her company, had intended to become a recluse.

Several ship and plane trips had followed in rapid succession. Always there was a thread of consistency in the directions his travels took. Time after time he had come face-to-face with Sue, and each time it had become more difficult for her to explain the meeting as coincidence.

Finally, on a north-bound hop from Spain he had threatened to kill her if she shadowed him any farther. It was then that she had almost spilled her knowledge of his hara-kiri crusades and the fact that she was being paid to write his story. But at the very moment that Mr. Hinko had drawn his sword and Sue's hand had twitched toward her handbag, she had squirmed out by her wits.

"Meaning what?" Hank asked, still hugging the little white pistol in his jacket pocket as he jogged along.

"Meaning that I told a powerful lie,

and succeeded in putting H. K. and myself in the same boat," said Sue. Her voice lowered to a mysterious whisper. "I told him *I* was being mysteriously *drawn* to travel in certain directions. I didn't know where I was going, or why, but *I knew this was the right way.*"

"What did he say to that?" said Hank.

"He put his sword away, looking at me like love at first sight, and said, 'So *you* have felt it too? You *understand?*' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said—"

"Hold the boat," said Hank. "Understand *what?*"

"I didn't have the slightest idea. Then he said, 'It *is* a weird feeling,' and I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'To be drawn by such a *power*,' and I said –"

"You said *yes*," Hank mumbled.

"Right. And he said, 'You too must be very, very wicked,' and I said—"

"You said, '*No*, by hen!' and took a shot at him."

"Not on your life. I said, 'Very, very, *very* wicked,' as sweetly as I could say it, and beat it to my compartment and locked the door and held the gun on it all night. Wicked or not, I was just plain scared."

"The fellow's mad," said Hank.

"That's what you said about Jimpson," said Susan. "The bee that keeps stinging me is the way this Mr. Hinko consistently follows this *something*—something he doesn't understand."

"You mentioned fits," Hank suggested. "Maybe he's an epileptic."

"Maybe," said Susan, without much conviction. "Those storms got him in an awful uproar. The fisherman's wife that lodged him told me he paced the floor and smashed up furniture. But maybe that's excusable, considering the quake. How did you behave, Hank?"

"Like an epileptic," said Hank. Then he gave a startled gulp. "Oh-oh. What've we got here?"

JUST ahead was the gate to the castle grounds. Sounds roughly akin to the galloping of wild horses could be heard from somewhere beyond. There was some shouting and snorting –human sounds in spite of their animal ferocity. Hanked gripped his gun and crept toward the gate cautiously.

Susan Smith was a shade bolder. She was burning up to know what her Japanese had run into.

The open gate afforded a view of the human hockey game moving swiftly back and forth across the court. The men in sailors' uniforms were chasing through dust clouds, swinging clubs lustily. Yes, and gleefully.

Suddenly the object of their clubbing came dashing out into the open. Hank saw him clearly—a small, dark, badly battered Oriental.

"My story!" Susan gasped. "If they kill him—" Her groan sent chills through Hank. "Stop them, Hank. Don't let them—"

Crack! The little pearl handled pistol spoke—and a decisive word it was. One of the sailors turned a tortuous flipflop, fell hard. Others tripped over him. The momentary heap of sailors and clubs gave the Japanese his chance. He sprang out the gate and darted down the trail.

But his quick Japanese eyes caught sight of Sue. He whirled on his boot, paused long enough to cry some damning words at her in his crisp Oriental.

"So it's *you*. *You* set this trap!"

"No! No! I didn't—" Her voice choked off. A thunder of footsteps told her that the hockey game was on again. She turned to see the sailors chasing pell-mell across the open court, swinging their clubs.

The object of their chase was Hank Switcher. There was no gun in his hand now.

"Run, Hank, run!" she screamed.

Hank was running—but fast. For all his turtle-like build, he must have been a dash man at the last Olympics, thought Sue. But Hank Switcher couldn't outrun nine sailors with long wooden clubs—not for long.

Yes, there were nine of them. The tenth still lay where he had fallen. For once the little pearl-handled companion had spoken out of turn.

CHAPTER VII

Jag Rouse—Ambitious Man

WHEN Graygortch had begun his ascent of the lofty tower stairs and the gongs on each landing had clanged the coming s t o r m, Jag Rouse had jumped into his usual swift routine of supervising the castle activities.

With long-practiced military dignity he had marched through the lower halls to see that kitchen utensils and dining hall furniture were flung into their well established earthquake nooks.

He had bounded up the ornamental stairways, a trail of little ringing bells following in his wake.

His swift survey completed, he had hastened to follow Graygortch. Of all the persons in the castle, Jag Rouse was the only one privileged to be with the tottering old man during the storm rituals.

Just as Rouse was crossing the South Pole plaza to mount the tower steps, he caught a glimpse of a *strange face.*

Jag Rouse stopped, gazed across the lavender-lighted space for a second look.

The newcomer was a tall athletic young man. His comfortable khaki suit was cut along military lines but bore no military insignia.

Rouse scowled. Strangers weren't welcome here. How had this person slipped by the sailors?

There was a disturbing alertness in the young fellow's bearing—almost as if he knew his way around. He crossed straight over to the wall and began removing pictures like a well-trained sailor.

Then Rouse saw something else. In the archway leading off from the South Pole the old man's niece was waiting.

So there was foul business going on. Rouse had suspected it. And that young female thorn in the old man's flesh was mixed up in it. The damned attractive little wench. If the old man would just hand out a little more authority, just give Rouse a little more rope, there'd be an end to these underhand intrigues . . . yes, a marriage of convenience would be just the thing—

With a quick-flung second glance at the strange young man, Rouse hurried on his way.

He took the tower steps three at a time. Then, within a step of the first-gong landing, momentarily out of sight of the lavender-lighted plaza, he ducked through a fold in the lofty black velvet draperies. He reached up into the darkness, caught the end of an unseen rope, climbed up hand over hand.

A full eighty feet of climbing brought Rouse's hands to the steel hook from which the rope was suspended. His feet found the solid landing, he stepped through a slit in the massive velvet draperies.

THE cool breeze of the open tower filled his gasping lungs. Jag Rouse was proud of that hand-over-hand climb. Not a sailor in the castle could duplicate that feat, he was satisfied.

Not that any had ever tried. The rope was his own secret passage to this open tower-top room. Only Graygortch knew. The sailors and menials supposed that Rouse used the tower stairs, the same as Graygortch, and

they never ceased to wonder about his uncanny powers of silencing the gongs.

That was a laugh. What made it good was that a few sailors once tried the ascent. They knew Graygortch's iron-clad rule but they were over-powered by a burning curiosity to know what caused the storms. Three of them followed the velvet walled spiral stairs as far as the first landing. Clinging to the draperies, they tried to ferry themselves over it without touching. But the gong gave them away. And the next morning at Captain Rouse's regular disciplinary ceremony on the overhanging porch, fifteen sailors took the well known march over the trap door, and at the finish of the march there were only twelve.

That incident had not been forgotten.

Now Jag Rouse glanced up through the wide circular instrument whose metallic filigree admitted patches of stars from the summer sky. Another clear night. A cool wind flowed through the circle of open windows. This was the kind of weather the old man picked for his storms.

Rouse touched a switch. The upper cylindrical walls went aglow with bars of colored light. Each of the thirteen open windows became a frame of light. The massive metallic filigree became a maze of crisscrossing reflections.

Seven gongs had struck. Rouse marched to the steps to give the pallid-faced old Graygortch a hand as the eighth and final note clanged and resounded up and down through the great tower.

"I should walk up with you," Rouse said, drawing up his high left shoulder defensively as he assisted the tottering, gasping old man. "It's foolish for you to refuse me that privilege any longer. If you ever fell—"

Graygortch gave a slight deep-throated cough. It silenced the big brisk soldier, who knew that the old man seldom talked at times like these. The long march up the steps did something to him—built up his mood for this ritual. He resented breaking the spell.

Rouse led the old man over to the center of the room, and having removed the cansvas cover from the leather-upholstered seat, helped him to a sitting position.

"Are you ready?" Rouse asked.

The old man made no answer. His breathing was hard, rasping.

Rouse went to the wall, unlocked a weather-proof chest, lifted the silk coverings from the table of electrical instruments. This table of apparatus he rolled carefully across the floor, drawing after it the loops of heavily insulated wire.

Now Graygortch's bony hands rested upon the low table. His long fingers moved stiffly, yet with a certain precision as if operated by invisible wires.

The huge circular maze of metal overhead came downward slowly.

Rouse retired to an alcove in the wall, hooked his arms through the triangular wooden beams to support himself against the coming quake. From this position he could watch the mystifying process.

FOR nine years Jag Rouse had watched these storms come and go. For nine years he had wondered at their magnificence and grown more and more discontent. He had pleaded with Graygortch for an active share in this evil destructive ritual; he had beseeched and cajoled and even supplicated—unfamiliar though he was with the ways of prayer. But this was the most Graygortch had ever granted him—the right to sit at the edge of the circular room—to see the metallic tubes descend to form a wheel around the instrument table—to watch Graygortch's hands play

upon the mysterious keyboard and bring on the storm.

This privilege was, of course, far more than Graygortch granted to anyone else. Not one of the sailors had ever had a glimpse of this tower top. None of them, with the possible exception of that impertinent whistle-bunny of a Schubert, enjoyed the slightest confidence with the old man.

However, there *were* a few chosen men, somewhere on this earth, who shared this ritual by a sort of remote control.

Rouse knew this. He had known it ever since Graygortch's first distant disciple had begun to tune in, so to speak. In the first years of the storms, before the quakes had become so potent, Rouse had sometimes been able to see those evil-faced visitors whose countenances floated before the old man's hypnotizing eyes during this diabolical communion.

One of those men, Rouse knew only too well, was the war-waging dictator of Central Europe.

But Adolph Hitler, evil power that he was, filled only *one* of the thirteen niches in Graygortch's circle of esoteric communion.

A few of Hitler's close associates also numbered among the chosen. Other selections came from other parts of the globe. But as yet only twelve of the thirteen places had been filled.

There was much that Rouse did not know about the old man's inner experiences accompanying these storm rituals. Graygortch was greedily silent about it all. Those who had known him more than nine years insisted that he had sunken into a mysterious insanity. Just when his creaking old bones were near to finding rest through death, he had rallied. The energy of this strange madness had taken root in him, he had scorned the grave, had gone on living, had equipped his castle with a welter of unique scientific paraphernalia.

"A pity he couldn't have died," his old friends always said. Rouse, from the day of his chance coming to this castle, had heard that sentiment re-echoed countlessly.

For Rouse it was a repulsive sentiment. That so-called madness was the magnet that had drawn Captain Jag Rouse here, seized him, held him, inflamed with a desire to serve. Evil was something Rouse could understand and appreciate. Just as a highly sensitive musician might feel his way into the experiences of a great master composer, so Jag Rouse sought to attune himself to the fathomless genius of this unnatural man called Graygortch.

Rouse could only gather conclusions from what he saw and felt and guessed. But he was firmly convinced of one thing: Graygortch knew that he had only a short time left to go.

The end was near, and Graygortch burned with a desire as potent as the very lightning he released from the thirteen windows of this tower top. He wanted to complete his choices. He wanted to weld all thirteen of his disciples into that final bond—that ultimate union of the earth's most potent men of evil—a union that would reshape the destiny of life of mankind. . . . Along what lines, no man would dare to guess. . . .

NOW the storm came to an end.

The haunting, hypnotizing eyes of evil ceased their burning. Rouse relaxed his grip on the triangular timbers, slackened his tense breathing, rubbed his eyes.

The massive disc of metallic tubes rose gradually, came to rest, a fretted ceiling above the circle of open windows.

Graygortch waited until Ross had

wheeled the instrument table back to its weatherproof case. Then the old man unbent and with Rouse's support he moved feebly back to the stairs.

A high gong note clanged out over the Flinfiord valley, and the inhabitants of both villages knew the night's storm was over.

"One word, your honor," said Jag Rouse, as the shadowy old form began to move down the steps. "Another stranger has found his way in. I don't like it. I'm going to apply my disciplines to the full."

Graygortch flicked his bony fingers ever so slightly—his way of saying that such was the captain's rightful authority.

"But there's something disturbing," Rouse added. "I hate to mention it, but I suspect your niece of extending hospitality."

Now the old man turned, looked up at Rouse with a hint of questioning in his shaggy eyebrows.

"No offense," Rouse hastily added. "She's young. If she gets mixed up in intrigues that constitute a breech of discipline—"

"Discipline!" The word echoed resonantly from Graygortch's ragged vocal chords. His one-word comment was wholly unsatisfying to Rouse. *Discipline* was a favorite word with the old man.

"I'm thinking the girl needs more supervision," said Rouse. "If I were to marry her—" A quick twitch of the old man's fingers cut him short. He grasped at a defensive straw. "If something were to happen—if you were to—"

"Die?" said Graygortch.

"Yes," said Jag Rouse, but he shrank back, sure that he had blurted an indiscretion. "What I mean is, we can't have criminals sliding in here, racketeering under her protection. She's innocent of what's going on—I might say ignorant. If she woke up some morning and found herself legally in possession of this castle, have you considered what a situation she'd face?"

"Yes," said Graygortch.

"Oh?" The old man's curt answer only sharpened Rouse's perturbation.

"Have her dine with me at noon," said Graygortch.

"Very well. You might set things up and I'll be ready when you need me," said Rouse, hoping the old man caught the spirit of sacrifice that attended his willingness to marry the girl. "Meanwhile I'll carry on with my regular discipline."

"Discipline," Graygortch echoed once more. "If you were less soft—"

Jag Rouse caught his breath, held it until the old man finished.

"You might do." The old man's shaggy eyebrows twitched a trifle, then he turned and proceeded down the spiralled stairs.

"Soft!" Rouse repeated to himself as he climbed down the rope. That was a hot one! After all the prisoner-executing he'd done back in his military days, not to mention certain bloody turncoat acts he'd dealt out to his "friends" . . . after all the trapdoor disciplinary ceremonies he'd conducted here at the castle . . . *he was too soft!*

Too soft for what?

Was it possible that one of those thirteen discipleships might fall to *him* —*if* he qualified?

The thought held him in such a grip that for a full minute he clung to the rope motionless, forgetting that he had completed his descent.

To be a disciple of destiny—

To enter into Graygortch's secret realm—

To be welded in a spiritual union with the most powerful, most treacherous war-mongers of Europe, the handpicked big-shots of evil from all over the

world—twelve of them and himself!

Captain Jag Rouse strode through the halls carrying his high left shoulder a trifle higher. He was bearing an invisible load of fresh determination. The discipline around Graygortch Castle was going to stiffen.

To begin with, Rouse would rout out that khaki-clad young stranger and give him the works. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

Hank to the Rescue

ROSS BRADFORD roused up out of his storm spell. The vision that seemed to have hypnotized him into inertia had vanished. The faint gong sounds filtered through the heavy walls, slowly descending the eight tone scale.

Vivian was still sitting before the microphone, but the radio had been switched off. She was weeping.

"Is there anything I can do?" Ross spoke softly.

The girl touched a handkerchief to her face before she turned to him. She seemed to have forgotten there was still a visitor present.

"I'd better go," said Ross. He felt somewhat embarrassed at being here, especially considering the hour. It must be almost morning. "I'm sorry to see you in such a mess of trouble. I don't know what it's all about. But I wish I could take you away—"

Vivian rose defensively. She resented being thought a weakling, especially by this stranger of whom she knew so little. A touch of spitfire manner returned.

"I shouldn't have let you come here. I only did it because I hate Rouse. But you'll have to deal with him sooner or later—unless—"

"Unless *what?*"

"Unless Uncle Graygortch lets Schubert take charge of you. You are a candidate for my marriage, you know."

Ross looked at her sternly. "I thought I made it plain, young lady, that I—"

"When did you first feel the mysterious call to come here, Mr. Bradford?"

"There wasn't any mysterious call. I came of my own volition. I'll go the same way."

"I'm afraid it isn't as easy as that. Whether you knew it or not, my uncle influenced you to come here. I can't tell you how. I only know that his power reaches out all over the face of the earth. It calls to people—a certain class of people."

"Maybe I'm not in that class," said Ross.

Vivian's lips curved in a smile that was half pity. "I wish I could think you weren't."

Ross shrugged. "I don't know what you think I am, but you needn't feel sorry for me. I've come here to see what's back of this skyful of misdirected power. Nobody seems to know. Everybody's fogged up with superstitions—"

"They're not superstitions," said Vivian curtly. "Let me show you something."

SHE opened a miniature door that led into a second room of her childhood suite. He followed her to the east window, looked out across the black mountain-tops toward the village on the east side of the island. A row of five or six fires marked the location of the village.

"They hold their own ceremonies down there after each storm." said Vivian. "That east village was formed in recent years by persons from all over the world who tried to come to the castle."

"Why did they want to come?"

"They felt the mysterious call—that's as far as the explanation goes," said Vivian. "All I know is that we're continually molested by newcomers. Many of them bring gifts. Our sailors take the gifts and then beat the people away. Some of them sail back home, others can't seem to leave. They drift over to the east slope, build houses and live. But the native fishermen won't have any dealings with them because they know that everyone mysteriously drawn here is some sort of criminal.

"Now, Mr. Bradford," the girl led the way back across the room, "I hope I've made myself clear."

"I see you've got me branded," Ross chuckled, mirthlessly. "All right, as long as you feel that way we'd better not have any further dealings. Now if someone will just introduce me to this man Graygortch so I can pick up one or two facts ."

"That will be up to Schubert or Rou—"

A sharp rap at the corridor door threw Vivian into a hushed flutter. She motioned Ross back into the farther room, shut the door after him, then answered the knock.

It was Captain Rouse. He wanted to know if Vivian had seen a stranger, a young man in khaki.

"You'd better try the guest chambers," Vivian replied. "I don't know anything about him."

She opened the door far enough to feel the chill of Rouse's eyes.

A moment later the big man's footsteps died away.

"Since you've marked me as a criminal," said Ross, when Vivian had rejoined him in the farther room, "why didn't you turn me in?"

The girl was trembling. Her feelings were apparently too complex for words. Suddenly she was fighting back tears. "You—you don't know what it's like, living here."

Ross frowned. Scarcely realizing what he was doing, he caught her arms in his hands, drew her close.

"You've no business living in this mess. Let me get you out of it. I'll play square with you—"

"Listen to me, Ross." The note of urgency in her voice struck home. "You're the one who's in danger. There's no such thing as a fair chance around here when Jag Rouse looks the way I saw him look a moment ago."

Ross' lips tightened subbornly. "I don't intend to leave this castle until I—"

"You couldn't leave it if you wanted to. But I can't hide you here any longer. When Rouse comes back he'll bring some maids to search my rooms. You've got to hurry. I can't tell you where to go."

"Could I borrow a few things?" Ross passed his hands along the conglomeration of articles that filled the shelves. He picked up a box of modeling clay and a ball of thread, much to Vivian's bewilderment. "Thanks. I'll go now."

"Where?"

"Back to my room first. From there—well, it depends."

VIVIAN opened the little corridor door, listened for the bells. Everything was quiet. "Now's your chance, Ross," she said. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

He hesitated, suddenly aware that she was pressing his hand impulsively.

"I know how to be careful," he said. He lifted her hand, pressed it to his lips in a manner at once brusque and tender. "But I warn you, I'd rather be reckless—"

A blaze of spitfire temper shot from Vivian's eyes, crossed up by a hint of amused smile from her lips.

"Hurry," she said.

Instantly, she closed the little door and Ross, standing outside it, heard it lock.

He thrust the box of modeling clay inside his shirt, slipped cautiously back to his southwest corner room.

The slightest gray of dawn broke the eastern sky. Jimpson was on his way up the perpendicular cliff to make his morning call.

Ross wrote a brief message, tied it, together with a small lump of clay, to the thread, and proceeded to unwind the spool.

The pendulum swung down. Within a few minutes Jimpson, after recovering from the fright of being bumped on the nose with a floating gob of clay, read the message.

There, Ross thought; if one Hank Switcher was still on the island, that should be enough to warn him to keep away from this danger spot.

Jimpson was looking up with what appeared, through the heavy grayness, to be a pleased grin, indicating by motions that he was eager to do anything he could in the way of favors. Ross passed down a second message inquiring whether there was any spare rope to be had.

It was a matter of several minutes before this order was filled. Ross kept a sharp ear toward the corridor door. Rouse and a few of the sailors were coming back toward this corner of the castle. They stopped to search each room. That was Rouse's characteristic thoroughness.

At last Jimpson, some two and a half floors below Ross' window, emerged from what must have been a sub-basement supply room. He had found a coil of light strong rope, also a roll of fine wire.

With the thread, Ross lifted the wire. With the wire he was able to pull up the end of the rope. Jimpson had certainly done his good turn for today.

AND while Jimpson plodded down the cliffside by his well defined route, Ross Bradford threaded his way upward into unexplored territory. Having succeeded in looping the rope over a projecting timber at the roof's edge, he moved himself, bag and baggage, out of the window and up to the castle's penthouse regions.

Only instead of penthouses there were towers—seldom occupied, no doubt, but they did contain windows and Ross was taking no chances on being seen. He made a swift survey of the rambling roofs and chose a well concealed nook for his headquarters. There he deposited his wire, rope, thread and clay. Then he slipped back to the roof's edge where he had crawled up, listened.

Soon he heard Rouse and three or four sailors come into his former room, search it, and leave without picking up his trail. His breathing grew easier. For the present he was comparatively safe. He cast a long curious gaze at the one tall cylindrical tower, noted its unglassed windows.

But there was a little too much daylight, already, for him to venture to any higher levels. The guards out on the court might see him. The mysteries of the storm tower would have to wait.

A dense fog lay thick on the sea under the rising dawn.

Before that fog lifted, Ross was certain he heard the voice of Hank Switcher, wafting up from the opaque gray. Jimpson's voice, too, was unmistakable; and there was also the voice of a girl.

So Hank had got the message, thought Ross. He would stay away—maybe. This was no place for Hank. There was a wonderful supply of dynamite for his story notebooks, all right;

but Hank wasn't cut out for skating this close to dynamite. He'd better stay away and get his material second hand. Ross wished he'd made the message to Hank more emphatic.

An uneventful day was exactly what Ross Bradford wanted, and he got it.

Most of the forenoon he passed lying in his chosen roof nook, planning, waiting. His idea for exploring the storm tower began to crystallize.

The afternoon was only slightly disturbed. A ladder was up-ended at one of the remote eaves and four sailors climbed up on the roof. Ross thought, "Here it comes. They're after me."

But the sailors went about their own business, which consisted of hoisting some timbers to the roof and doing some carpenter work. These quakes were rough on the old blue-stone castle, and the job of reinforcing the architecture was evidently a regular chore.

Ross could hear the men talking as they worked. He listened intently, learned more of the inside life of this place, only to become more mystified. He was surprised to hear, among other things, that there was a sub-basement power plant which was turbine operated, receiving its water power from the Flinfiord river.

There was much speculation among these men about Schubert's unorthodox behavior in admitting a stranger the other day—apparently without Rouse's consent. Too bad Schubert wasn't tough enough to defy Rouse outright, they said. Or was he?

Rouse's search party, the men agreed, would smoke the mysterious stranger out of his hiding place sooner or later. And Rouse was expected to be in good form for dealing with the fellow when they found him.

EVENING came on, Ross Bradford again had the range of the roof to himself. He waited eagerly for the dark.

Darkness proved a disappointment. Two of the minor towers were lighted. Their slits of windows threw bright stripes of light across the rooftops. If Ross crossed those stripes he ran the risk of being spotted by sailors stationed at the outer edge of the hockey court.

Later in the night one of the towers darkened. Ross took his rope, felt his way along the eaves. It was a long and complicated way around the rooftops, spiked with perilous climbs and dead ends.

But at length he was safe on a high ridgepole that winged out from the tall tower approximately half way up its eight foot height.

There Ross went to work flinging his looped rope upward into the darkness. Somewhere up on that tower top there would be something for the loop to catch on—he hoped.

He threw rope until his arm rebelled. A good thing, he muttered, that he didn't count his trials. He'd have run out of numbers.

"Come, seven," he growled, and tried again. One catch was all he needed. Hours of trial and error were all he got. He lengthened the rope, tied heavier knots in it to give it more weight, flung it with his left hand to try to change the angle. Each time the rope came thumping back to the roof.

He swore under his breath. Forty or fifty feet of upright cylindrical wall were all that separated him from the unknown.

Forty or fifty feet of perpendicular blackness against the solid overcast sky.

A light sprinkling rain passed over. The roof timbers grew slick. Ross lopped himself over the ridgepole, rested, tried to think of a substitute plan.

But no flashing ideas came to him out

of the blackness. He might climb back into his castle room and take a long chance on slipping through corridors and ascending the tower stairs. But no —the bells would betray him at every corner. Or if he got by them, the great tower gongs would finish him. As long as Rouse was on the warpath, any such foolhardy attempt would be futile—and worse.

Yes, one slip could be fatal. Ross had caught some conversation about Rouse's trapdoor disciplinary ceremonies—which recalled a mental picture of Jimpson waiting at the foot of the promontory to record his peculiar brand of statistics.

Ross wondered how soon the searching party would think of the roof. He wondered whether this light rain would make tracks.

THE first hint of dawn was in the sky when he at last achieved his hard-earned success.

The long rope slithered high into the air, barely cutting over the upper edge of the tower—a little visibility went a long ways. The loop dropped down out of sight and when Ross tugged he found the rope had caught—on something, he didn't know what.

He tried it with increasing pulls, finally added his whole weight to it. It was solid, ready for ascent.

But the graying sky reminded him of something else—Jimpson. The crippled messenger must be contacted now or not at all today.

Ross cut the surplus rope off at the ridgepole, looped it around his shoulder and made his way down to his original roof headquarters. The second tower's lights had gone off long ago, so the return trip was an easy shortcut.

A shadowy Jimpson was threading his way upward along the bleak gray promontory wall far beneath the eaves.

Soon the message thread, weighted with a lump of clay, was carrying pencilled communications back and forth.

Your friend said tell you he would come up. Told me so yesterday morning.—J.

That message made Ross' fever leap. He rolled the note into a wad, flipped it seaward, swore to himself.

The second message concerned Jimpson's own game—whatever it might be. He needed the roll of wire. Ross sent it down, and with it a few tools from his pocket kit. Jimpson waved a thank-you, picked up the daily package Fantella had prepared for him, and went his way.

Clouds now turned to pink fluffy balls, drifted across the eastern mountaintops. The black jagged line that marked the edge of the river canyon took on tints of morning color.

From the eastern edge of the castle grounds—the hockey court, as Ross termed it—came a bluster of voices. Some sailors on night guard duty roused up from their portable cots, angry to be awakened so early.

Someone was approaching the gate, evidently.

Ross turned his roof-climbing course away from the big tower, slipped along the eaves to the eastward. He could see a group of sailors making ready with their clubs. Their muttering hushed.

At last a thin little shadow of a man slipped through the gate. His cautious creeping movement struck Ross as being sinister. Ross crawled to another roof and by the time he got his next view the hockey game was on. The sailors rushed in from two sides to swamp the dark little newcomer with blows.

The rain-spattered court turned into a dusty battleground. As the chase circled around, Ross caught a count of the forces. Ten to one. The ten had clubs. The one had a huge curved sword hang-

ing at his side—so much dead weight. The fellow was too badly scared to think of defending himself.

NOW the game was in full fury almost directly below Ross. The victim was a Japanese. In a thin crackling voice he was trying to shout his protests. The sailors guffawed at him and poured on their blows.

From his porchtop observatory Ross got a good look at the clubs. At the business end they resembled hammers out of a giant piano. One side of each club was heavily padded with felt, the opposite side was polished wood. So that was why this game could last more than a few minutes. The players could lay on with all their might, giving vent to the killers' impulses, and still make the victim last.

For a full hour they sandbagged the Japanese.

Sometimes after a goal they would stop for a breathing spell, but the instant the infuriated Oriental reached for his sword they jumped back into the game full force.

Ross thought, if only Hank Switcher could see a little of this before he showed his face inside that gate, he'd know enough to do his running in the other direction.

Suddenly the shouting indicated that the game was over and it was time for a final chase to the gate.

"Give him the spines," some one yelled.

The players turned their clubs over in their hands. A square blow from the wooden sides could deal death. The sailors spread back to give the Japanese his cue. He summoned his flayed energies, threw himself into a race for the open gate.

Ross caught his breath. Just outside that gate were two other figures. They were approaching swiftly. One was a girl, the other—well, there was only one person in the world that walked with that particular lumbering turtle-like waddle—

It all happened so suddenly Ross wasn't sure what he saw. But beyond that cloud of dust someone fired a gun. Then the chase whirled back toward the castle pellmell.

In that moment Ross Bradford almost fell off the porch roof. What became of the Japanese or the girl he didn't know. All that concerned him was that one clubber had gone down. The other nine were racing madly toward the porch, and the man who led the race was Hank Switcher.

CHAPTER X

Into the Tower

"GIVE him the spines!" one of the players shouted.

There was a momentary slackening of speed in the wave of red-hot pursuit. The clubs turned over in their hands. Hank was just two good jumps ahead of the deadly swishes. He was making a B-line for the castle and his plump face was as white as chalk.

Suddenly he dodged to keep from running over Jag Rouse.

The big captain strode out onto the court with the directness of a marching statue. "Halt!" he roared. "Attention!"

The clubmen fairly skidded to a stop. Hank Switcher stopped too, frozen as if in a nightmare.

"*I'll* handle this!" Rouse growled as the men lined up before him. "Hold your tracks, you skylarkin' crab. I'll take care of you in a minute." The big officer turned his commands on the line of sailors. "About *face*! Forward march! . . ."

Rouse fell in back of them and

"I pronounce him guilty," said Jag Rouse.
"Spring the trap and have it over with!"

marched them twenty paces out, gave them a sharp squads left, brought them to a halt and an about-face toeing a chalk line—their customary position for receiving dressings-down.

"Now sailors—"

"Your honor, the prisoner—" some one blurted.

"Shut up! I'm talking!" Rouse delivered the upstart a slap in the mouth. "I'll give you some pointers on this club swinging."

He took a club from the end man.

"But he's gone!" the sailor piped.

Ross had no sympathy with the captain's brutality, but he could have given that piper a pancake flattening.

Those thirty seconds of marching had been Ross' opportunity and he had jumped for it. He had thrown a loop of rope down. Hank had lurched away from it like a kangaroo, then had caught the slight hiss from the porch roof. A second later he had swung up off the ground for a magic getaway.

"Hs-s-sh!" Ross had muttered, catching Hank by the belt and jerking him over the eave. "Keep low. Run for it."

They had ducked and gone. By the time the sailor blurted, they were out of sight.

Captain Rouse's angry roar came after them.

"What the hell?—They don't walk out on me that way!"

"Up on the roof," one of the guards yelled. "I seen him swing up. There's two of 'em."

"All right, so there's two of them. They're not gonna take off and fly, are they? Listen to me. . . ."

THE irate captain went into a dressing-down speech that was evidently the heaviest thing on his chest. Then he dispatched some guards to ascend the roofs and bring the intruders down.

By this time Ross and Hank had reached the west edge of the castle top. Hank's eyes barely clung to their sockets as he got his first sight of the five-hundred foot drop. He was so scared that if Ross had said, "Jump," he'd have jumped.

"Get your pocket knife," Ross snapped. "We've got to scrape some rope."

He tightened the loop over the end of a beam that projected above the water. He seized the rope a couple of yards below the slipknot, and began scraping it with Hank's pocketknife—long sweeping strokes.

"Take over," he barked at Hank. "See that the shreds blow off the roof. As soon as I get back we'll break the rope."

Ross dashed eastward across the castle roofs, wadding a small ball of clay in his hand as he went.

"Too late," he thought as he saw the end of a ladder appear at the front porch roof. But a glimpse of the scene at the far end of the court—a group of sailors gathered around the clubman who had been shot sent a desperate heat through his blood.

One sailor neared the top of the ladder just as Ross got there. The fellow reached for a gun, but Ross clipped him squarely on the jaw. The fellow's eyes wobbled, he lost his hold on the rung, slipped down the stringer like a sack of meal. The second sailor on the way up barely dodged him.

Ross was tempted to kick the ladder over, but that was his second best bet. He seized it, gave at a jitterbug jerking. The sailor leaped back to the ground. But by the time his feet touched, the ladder swung up to the roof. Before the fellow could start firing, Ross and the ladder were out of sight.

It would take a couple of minutes, Ross guessed to find another ladder.

Two minutes weren't much; not time enough for much moss to grow, but time enough to stave off several bullets.

Ross jerked the clay from his pocket, slapped it against the sole of his shoe. He scurried along to the westward dragging the ladder after him. Both the ladder and clay left tracks.

At the first steep roof, he swung the ladder up toward the ridgepole, climbed the rungs, left the ladder there. Sliding down on the other side, he left conspicuous tracks of clay.

HE found Hank still scraping rope.

"Off with your shoes, Hank," Ross said breathlessly. He took the rope, broke it, threw the long end to the ocean.

Hank watched it sail down, saw it jump across a jutting rock and partially sink into the waves.

Ross jerked his own shoes off, stuffed them inside his shirt. Then he and Hank made tracks—very inconspicuous stocking-footed tracks—to the big tower.

"The rope's waiting," Ross whispered. "Up as fast as you can go . . . What's the matter, man?"

"I can't do it," Hank choked, glancing up at the forty foot climb.

"I'll give you a lift," said Ross. "Keep a foot in the loop. If they catch us—"

He didn't finish. The *if* implied its own finish. He tested the rope, spit on his hands, took the ascent hand-over-hand.

Arriving at the circle of open windows, he locked his legs on the tower wall, put his hands to the rope, drew it up and Hank Switcher with it.

In a moment Ross, Hank, and the rope were completely hidden within the tower.

"We breathe again," Ross said in an undertone. "What's the matter, Hank? Sick?"

"I killed a man out there," said Hank.

"I thought so." said Ross. He spared his friend any further scrutinizing looks. "Let's get down out of these ledges and see what we've got here. You know, Hank, this is where the big fireworks comes from."

They clambered down from the circular ledge to the floor. Hank lay down and covered his eyes with his hand. Ross suggested shoes for a pillow since they weren't being used otherwise.

Ross stocking-footed around the circular room marveling at its absence of furnishings.

In size it matched the South Pole plaza, which in turn had reminded him of the hundred-foot rotundas of some state capitol buildings back in the U.S.A.

But this circular room was bare of ornamentation or design other than that furnished by thirteen encircling windows and a maze of crisscrossing shadows on the floor.

These shadows came from the open fretwork which comprised the ceiling—or was it a ceiling? It couldn't be simply that. It was too massive to be only an ornament, too open to serve as a roof over this room, too mysteriously jointed with metal and glass tubes—

The surprise was somehow breathtaking. This was it—that unknown something—

THIS was the instrument capable of reaching out vast arms of destruction. What it was or how it worked was far beyond Ross' most profound guess. But instantly he felt an impetuous desire to smash it.

Those perpendicular steel tracks, like upright ribs between the windows, he noted, were for rollers to ride against. This vast metallic spiderweb could be

raised and lowered. When lowered, its thirteen largest metallic arms would be stationed like so many rigid guns at the thirteen windows.

Although this instrument held increasing fascination for him the more he studied it, he gave passing attention to four other features of the room.

The most prominent was the canvas-covered seat in the center of the floor. Inspection showed it to be a spacious and comfortable leather-upholstered couch.

At one side of the room was a weather-proof chest large enough to hold a small grand piano. It was solidly locked. Near the bottom were openings to admit two pipes that elbowed out of the floor—and Ross guessed these to be lead-ins of electrical power.

A third feature of no little interest was the dark spiralling stairs, walled on each side by black velvet draperies. Ross couldn't look at those velvet walls without conjecturing upon the weird nature of Graygortch's storm rituals. If the man were sane—

But he couldn't be, resorting to such freakish and vastly destructive exhibitions. Again the welter of confusions flooded Ross's thoughts. Graygortch, whom he had never yet seen, was already a score of conflicting legends.

Finally Ross took particular notice of the hook upon which his rope had caught.

It was a steel hook projecting from near the top of the inner wall. Its obvious purpose was to support another rope—one that led down into bottomless blackness behind the long flowing black draperies.

"Have we thrown them?" Hank whispered, his eyes still closed.

Ross stepped up on the ledge and peered cautiously through a window. "We're okay for the present. There's a huddle of guards on the roof over at the west edge. They got field glasses and they're trying to spot our bodies in the sea."

"They figure the rope busted with us?" Hank asked.

"That's the general idea."

"They would never swallow that ruse if they knew me. I'd never swing out over the sea on a rope. What's the sense in it?"

"They'll think we tried to swing down into a castle window and the rope broke with us."

"You mean we were both on that rope at once?" Hank asked dubiously. "Maybe they'll figure that one of us got in at the window and the next fellow came along and busted loose."

"In that case," said Ross, "they'll continue to search the castle."

HANK stuck on that word *continue*, and Ross was forced to make some explanations. The varied receptions he had got from Schubert, Vivian, and Rouse interested Hank no end.

"Then the chase was on before I showed up," said Hank with a lowdown scowl. "It was on when you told Jimpson to tell me everything was hotsy-totsy."

"Things aren't hotsy-totsy," said Ross. "We'd just as well be frank about it."

"I'll be frank," said Hank with a groan. "I'm a louse . . . What do you think they'll do to me?"

"I don't know," said Ross. "What made you kill him?"

"Lost my head. Sue stuck a gun in my hand—"

"Sue?"

"That's the reporter gal with the handwriting. I told you she'd be good looking—and how! She's a swell dame, Ross."

Ross Bradford looked at his companion steadily, accusingly. "So she

put a gun in your hand—and you call her a swell gal . . . What'd you do with the gun?"

"It's out there by the gate, maybe. When I saw that bird fall I didn't have any more use for guns."

"And where's the girl?"

Hank made a helpless gesture with his hands. "Following the Jap, I guess. That's her game. She's been on him all the way from Tokio. That's her story. He's the high mogul of some fancy suicide racket—the old harakiri."

Ross groaned. "Let's hope he takes the first boat back home. If there's anything we don't need around here it's— Say, what did he want in this part of the world anyhow?"

"That's the question," said Hank. "He was drawn here."

"Drawn?"

"Mysteriously. She's been following him all the way. He didn't know where he was going. He just kept gravitating —"

"I'll . . . be . . . damned!" Ross gave a disgusted snort. Here it was again, that devilish superstition of Vivian's that people came here in answer to some subtle beckoning from her old Uncle Bill Graygortch. It was impossible, absurd . . . and yet, here was one Susan Smith who had seen that beckoning reach around the world.

"Hank," said Ross with his quiet penetrating confidence, "are you superstitious?"

"Of course not."

"Why did you come here? . . . Were you *drawn* here?"

"Hell, no. I came partly because I had a hunch you were in a jam. Partly because I wanted to tag along with Sue Smith. That gal's got a story—"

"When those storms broke loose," said Hank, "did you get any overpowering urge to come hiking up to this castle —or just how did you feel?"

"All I felt was scared," said Hank. "Plenty scared. That's all."

"You didn't see anything—such as a pair of evil eyes glaring—"

"Yes!" Hank gulped, coming up on his knees. "I saw 'em. Big dark eyes with a sort of luminous rim around them that shines right through your flesh. I saw 'em in both storms. *Did you?*"

Ross nodded slowly. "That's Graygortch."

"Wait a minute. Not so fast. Are you trying to tell me—"

"I saw those eyes just as you described them," said Ross stoutly. "I tried to make myself believe it was just some long forgotten memory coming back, the way things like that do. But if you saw it too—"

HANK slapped his hand down emphatically. "You can't tell me that that pair of eyes was what pulled me up the mountainside. I don't go for that a minute. Now if it had been a pair of eyes like Sue Smith's—"

Ross stuck out his hand. "Shake, brother. We're agreed on that. Those eyes were about as inviting as a nestful of rattlesnakes. I'll stake a lifetime of breakfasts on it, I didn't get drawn up here by an outside power, repulsive or otherwise. If we're going to pull this thing apart and see where the thunder and lightning comes from, that's our start."

"I getcha," said Hank. "We're here as free moral agents."

"Exactly," said Ross.

"And anything we do—such as committing an unintentional murder—"

Hank swallowed up his sentence in a painful gurgle. He stopped talking.

He began to pace the floor moodily. Ross tried to shake him out of it, but he preferred silence.

For another hour or more Ross kept

watch at a window. The warm noon sun glared down. The roof had been deserted, the ladder hauled away. Ross wondered if the sailors were convinced that their two intruders had dropped into the sea. It would give both Hank and himself the breathing spell they needed to get their plans formulated.

If Ross were only alone, the way would now be clear. He would wait here in the tower until Graygortch came to operate another storm. Then Ross would get to the bottom of things, even if he had to throttle the old man and shake the truth out of him.

These storms and quakes, Ross reflected, were costly in more ways than one. Even a tiny island like Flinfiord could be highly valuable to England in these crucial times. This speck on the map should be an air and sub base —and it *would* be if it were not being wasted as a hotbed of electrical destruction.

Ross wondered if the rumor would reach Vivian that he had fallen to the sea. His pulse quickened at the thought. He was conceited enough, he admitted to himself, to believe it might make a difference to her. In spite of her twisted notions about his being a criminal, she had given him the benefit of the doubt, had yielded him a little of her trust and confidence. There was a girl—

"Ross," Hank said abruptly, "I can't get it out of my mind. I didn't know the fellow. I didn't have anything against him. I just lost my head and shot him. What do you think they'll do to me?"

ROSS tried to reason the thing out. He had talked with lots of troubled men back in the Transient Hotel days and he knew the value of an ounce of understanding. But there was little he could say to Hank.

"You're a writer of stories and books, Hank," he said finally. "You've got the imagination to see your characters through lots of difficult circumstances. If you were writing a story about a man like yourself who had killed another man "

Hank shook his head. "It's no use. I couldn't have a man like me do a thing like that. I'm not the killing type. It just doesn't make sense. I'm no common criminal!"

"Not so loud," Ross warned, glancing toward the stairs. "Sounds carry through this tower, you know."

Hank stopped, apparently observing the velvet walled staircase for the first time.

"That's right," he said. "We're not too safe here, are we?"

"We'll know if anyone starts up. There's a gong on every – *Come away from there!*"

"I'm not going down, don't worry," said Hank, sauntering closer to the top step. "Just looking."

"Come back!"

Ross sprang to grab him, caught his arm just too late. Hank's toe touched the top step. The gong rang out—a full resounding tone that everyone in the castle would recognize as the eighth gong of the forbidden tower.

CHAPTER XI

Vivian Slaps Her Uncle

NOTHING less than a cry of "Fire!" could create as much stir as an irregular gong note. Village inhabitants on either shore of the Flinfiord would speculate on this strange occurrence and invent rumors to explain it.

Before the echoes died away, the maids and sailors and other functionaries of the Graygortch castlehold were scurrying toward the South Pole plaza

to see whether Graygortch's shadow was visible.

It was.

"Vivian's in there with him," one of the maids said. "I took their lunch in. They were having a big talk and weren't to be disturbed."

"Dot gong vill disturp him," Fantella retorted, "or I'm a burnt pie crust."

Rouse bounded through the corridors, wheezing and puffing like a runaway locomotive.

"I'm onto the roof-climbin' rats," he snarled. "I'll take care of this. Outa my way!"

The sailors snapped to attention and awaited orders. Captain Rouse, ignoring them, strode down the dead-end corridor toward Graygortch's study.

He came to an abrupt military halt in front of the table where the old man and Vivian sat.

"Yes?" said Graygortch in a low-rasping voice.

"Did you hear that gong? That's those two devils of steeplejacks we've been chasing. They're *up there,* your honor."

"Well?"

The forward thrust of Graygortch's head was slight, but it carried a potent challenge. Rouse was already on the defensive.

"It's the first slip in all these years, your honor."

"Make it the last," Graygortch said, his words as thoroughly frozen as his bodily attitude. "That tower is sacred."

"Yes, your honor. I'll get them down at once." Rouse gave a quick nod, turned to go, then hesitated. "You are aware, your honor, that this situation is hellishly complicated?"

"Why?" said Graygortch.

"Well, it's not so much what they might do to the instruments—"

"All the dynamite they could lift wouldn't dent those metals," said Graygortch.

"Sure, that's what I say. It's the principle of the thing—pouncing in on sacred premises like a couple of Nazi parachute jumpers. It's a ticklish situation."

"Get them down," said Graygortch. "Stop bothering me. I'm busy."

ROUSE nodded, but he didn't want to go. He looked for some excuse for further conversation. His eyes lingered on Vivian. Her girlish face had the look of a frightened kitten.

"Busy, you say?" He nodded meaningfully at Graygortch. "Sure, I understand. Vivian and me. You go ahead and fix things up, your honor, and I'll take this little platterful of trouble off your hands. Nor a bad dish—"

"Rouse!" Graygortch's cough was like the scraping of heavy timbers.

"I'm going," said Rouse, smirking. "I'll capture those birds somehow. It may take time, though."

"Why?"

"The trouble is, your honor," Rouse moved closer to the table, planted himself on the arm of a chair. "I'm not allowed to send any sailors up the stairs, you know."

"Well?"

"Nor up the rope either. In the first place, none of 'em could climb it. In the second place, you've forbid 'em to go up . . . unless you've changed your mind."

"So?"

"So that leaves it all to me, your honor."

"It's up to you," said Graygortch. The wrinkles around his aged eyes gathered as slightly as a contracting spider web. Rouse flinched.

"Yes, your honor. But have you stopped to think that after I've climbed a rope, hand over hand, eighty feet straight up, I'd be at a hellova disad-

vantage scrappin' with a couple of deadshot desperadoes—"

"Get out, coward!" came Graygortch's deep growl. "If you can't handle this I'll find a new captain."

"Yes, your honor."

Rouse bowed out and a little bell clinked as he turned into the corridor.

"Rouse," the low volcano rumble of Graygortch's voice followed after him. The captain whirled back and gave a salute. The old man's head tilted toward him. "Don't forget, you know how to ring the tower gongs with switches."

"Yes, your hon—"

"But stay off the stairs. They're mine."

Rouse nodded. He mumbled that he would get some sailors onto the roof at once to keep guns trained on the tower windows. But as for gongs, he didn't see how—

"Think it over," said Graygortch.

Rouse strode away, thinking it over.

THE old man returned his attention to his nineteen-year-old niece.

Before the gong had interrupted him, Graygortch had been in the midst of a lengthy lecture to Vivian. He had had several things to say about the conduct expected of a young girl who was soon to come into the possession of not only a castle and all the wealth that went with it, but also certain other properties which could not be accurately described.

"You can't be a little girl all your life," he resumed. "Grown-ups have to face responsibilities. I'm planning for you a highly unique inheritance—"

"Uncle Graygortch," the girl interrupted anxiously. "Does Rouse intend to kill those two—"

Slap. The old man's bony hand cracked down against the table.

"You're not listening to me, child."

"Yes, I am, Uncle. But—"

"Forget what Rouse said. Listen to me."

"I'm trying to, Uncle. But you talk so slow and—and sort of hard. Not like you used to when I was a little girl. You used to be so mild and gentle—"

"Vivian," said Graygortch, extending his long pointed fingers across the table toward her, "you must choose a husband at once. I insist upon it. It's for your good."

The girl's nostrils flared belligerently. She rose and started toward the door. "If that's all you have to say to me—"

"For your own good," he repeated.

"Why this sudden interest in my own good?"

"I've always watched out for your best interests, my dear."

"For the past nine years you've practically ignored me."

The spider-web wrinkles around the old man's eyes gathered into something meant for a smile. "I've been so busy. But now I've only a little while left. I must put things in order. Your husband must be chosen—someone strong enough to defend you against the outside world, my dear. Make up your mind to it—"

"I won't!" Vivian blurted, flinging her hands angrily, knocking some tea things off the table. She whirled on her heel.

"Vivian!" Again that low arresting voice.

"But I'm not going to marry into this swarm of criminals!" she shrieked, fighting angry tears.

"What do you want out of life, Vivian?"

"Before I'd marry one of your murdering sailors, I'd throw myself over the cliff!" For a moment she caught her breath at violence of what she had said. But she followed through, every word a breath of fire. "I mean it, Uncle Graygortch! You can sugar your tea

with that and drink it!"

THE old man eyed her steadily, searchingly. He raised his wrinkled old brow with a hint of sympathy. It wasn't much of an expression but it did something to melt Vivian's fury. She slumped down in her chair and gave way to a case of weeps.

Graygortch waited in silence until she slackened her crying.

"What," he repeated, "do you want out of life?"

"I want to be left alone," she sniffled.

"You want to spend all your days in your room, playing with your dolls, acting like a little girl?"

Vivian shook her head slowly. She looked up into the old man's face, trying to retrace the lines of sympathy that she had once loved. Why couldn't things be like they used to be, years ago, when he had been such a good, soft-tempered old man—the old man of the castle that everybody loved?

Her lips began to move, the yearnings of her heart welled up, she was suddenly confessing to him all the pent-up disappointments, sorrows, fears, longings of the past nine years, her hatred of all this criminal driftwood that had come to populate the castle.

"I used to love those evenings in the big living room," she said, "with a big red fire burning in the fireplace. There'd be a box of apples we'd just shipped in, and Fantella would peel them for all of us. And that new house man, Jimpson, would tell us marvelous stories about his hobo travels. And you and Dr. Zimmerman would always sit over in the corner by the big red tapestries and play checkers—"

"Dr. Zimmerman? Who's that?"

"Don't you remember—" Vivian broke off. Chills spread through her neck and shoulders. *Had Uncle Graygortch lost his mind?* She knew that was what some of the villagers thought. Fantella and some of the castle folk speculated about it too. But the thought was too frightening for Vivian. She shrank from any reminder of it.

"Zimmerman?" the old man repeated, apparently turning the name over in his mind. The spider webs around his eyes seemed to close, but he was watching her through narrow slits.

She crossed to the bookcase, packed with dusty papers and books that hadn't been touched for years. She found a photograph of Dr. Zimmerman, a large man with a high bald head, an honest, good-natured face, and a couple of extra chins.

"He was always your very best friend, Uncle Graygortch." She caught his eyes studying her sharply. "But you *can't* have forgotten him."

"My memory has gone to cobwebs," he said.

"But you still ask for him. I've heard you myself—only a few months ago."

For a moment all the wrinkles in Graygortch's face widened into an expression of questioning.

"When?"

"One night when you were walking in your sleep. Fantella brought me in to see you. She was excited, and so was I, because all at once you seemed to be just like you used to be before you—you—"

"Before I went crazy?"

THERE was something brutal in the old man's rasping voice. Vivian couldn't stand to hear him talk that way. Her trembling fingers dropped the picture. She scurried to the door.

"Wait," said Graygortch. "I wanted to hear more about that night that gave you and Fantella such pleasure."

"That wasn't the only time," said

Vivian tremulously. "There've been other nights in the past nine years that you've walked in your sleep. You walk into the big living room, past the fireplace over to the tapestries. Then you settle in your old yellow leather chair and ask why Doc Zimmerman doesn't come. You get restless. You think you've only a few hours to live, and you say you wanted to play one more game of checkers with Doc. We try to put you back to bed, but you don't hear us—"

Graygortch's deep scowl grew deeper, more sinister. "You know a lot about me, don't you?"

The taunt in his voice grated on the girl's mood of reverie. "But something always wakes you up, such as a corridor bell—"

The old man started faintly, then lapsed into his wrinkled old pretense of a smile.

"But when you wake you're not your old self any more."

"I'm my new self, the self you hate," the old man muttered bitterly, and began to rock himself restlessly in his chair with short jiggling motions that made his big shadow on the corridor wall do a nervous dance. "What happened to this Dr. Zimmerman?"

"I wish I knew," said Vivian. Her memory of the jolly, baldish old fellow told her that wherever he was he was doing good. She replaced the picture in the bookcase. "Now, may I go?"

"One thing more," said Graygortch, and he placed his corded knuckles down tightly on the girl's hand. "My new self—you won't mind it after you understand. Very soon—before I go—you'll know me better."

His steady eyes drove the fearful words home. She wanted to run. The bones of his fingers ground against the back of her hand.

"Nobody knows me," he said. "Do you see that shadow?"

She glanced toward the corridor. "Yes, of course."

"Is that me?"

"No, not really. It's just your shadow from that table lamp."

"That's all anyone knows of me—just my shadow. Graygortch pointed to his own face. "Neither is this me, Vivian. You cannot see me. You only see this shadow, done in rotten flesh and bones—"

HIS terrifying words were too much for her. She turned, started running toward the door. His foot reached out and tripped her. She sprawled on the floor.

She bounded up, her blood boiling, and sprang back toward the table.

Then she drew back, put her stinging palm to her lips, realized that she had struck the old man full in the face. She drank in his hurt expression, heard his deep old voice speak injured words.

"So you slap your old Uncle Bill."

A fitful compassion surged through her. "Uncle, I'm sorry. I didn't know—" her words were swallowed in sobs that overflowed from tormenting, chaotic emotions. "You couldn't have meant to—"

"You slap your old Uncle . . . You hate him . . . But wait! One stroke of power will change all that!"

Vivian fled as fast as she could go. She raced through the South Pole plaza, where Rouse was conducting a hard-boiled general assembly, but she didn't stop—not until she was safely behind the little three-foot door.

CHAPTER XII

Jag Rouse Prepares a Trap

ON LEAVING Graygortch several minutes earlier, Captain Rouse had

marched back to the South Pole plaza bristling with plans. The throngs were waiting, their mouths watering to know what was going to happen.

The sailors were eager for gun action. Could they shoot on sight?

"Hold your horses," Rouse growled. "We're gonna smoke 'em out. Get all the sailors in here for a general assembly—all but the machine-gun squad. I'll see them out on the roof. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Rouse and the machine gunners went to the roof.

"Get ropes and ladders and get your guns up here ready for action from three sides of the tower, and train your fire on the windows. Don't be afraid of busting any tower equipment. The only bustable stuff up there is those two murderin' monkeys."

One of the gunners questioned the charges. Were these two men to be slain because one of them had shot Killer McLoogin, Sailor Number 47, or because they were trespassing in Graygortch's private sanctum?

"What's the difference?" said Rouse.

"Plenty," said the gunman. "We've got an old rule that if a sailor on guard duty gets his bean busted its his own fault, and the fellow that gets him goes into sailor uniform on his number."

"Yeah," Rouse grunted. He scraped his feet on a ladder rung thoughtfully. "Yeah, that rule still goes. But this stranger that got McLoogin has knocked over his own applecart by crashin' the tower. Same with the other bird. I've seen both of 'em and they're up to no good. As for McLoogin, he'll get his verdict in the morning."

"McLoogin? I thought he was shot dead."

"He is. But that don't make him any less guilty of lettin' a man through."

Before leaving the roof Rouse went over the probable trend of events step by step with his gunmen, to leave no loopholes. If the two fugitives hadn't climbed out the windows and collected a perforation of bullets apiece by the time the top note of the gong sounded, then these sailors were to move up with their guns and ladders, ascend the outside of the tower, fire in at the windows.

"But watch where you fire," said Rouse. "I'll come up from the inside myself by that time. In fact, I'll probably take them single-handed before you get there."

That, indeed, was the very thing Rouse wished to avoid doing but his scheme was calculated to make the assembly in the castle *believe* he took them single-handed.

"I'll probably have them," he repeated, "but don't hang back. These birds are tricky. You know that from the way they fooled you on that fake busted rope." Rouse permitted himself the luxury of a superior chuckle. "*I* knew, the minute I saw the rope, that that was a bum steer. And you saps combin' the sea with field glasses for bodies. All right, don't let yourselves get slipped up on this time. Understand?"

A FEW minutes later, when he reached the thirty-odd assembled sailors in the South Pole plaza, Captain Rouse was ready with a full head of thunder.

"Sailors of the Graygortch Castle!" he shouted, and before he knew it he had plunged into a speech—the most powerful and moving speech he had ever unleashed. The semicircle of sailors stood stiffly, hung on every word.

But no one was carried away by the speech so much as Jag Rouse himself. No matter that the ideas were simply a bombastic glorification of cruelty to one's enemies, of hidebound discipline for one's own men. The point was that

for the moment Jag Rouse felt himself to be out-Hitlering Hitler.

That was the secret elation that swept through him. For had he not been given a broad hint that he might soon rise to stand side by side with the other twelve disciples of Graygortch—the makers of death, the arch-slaughterers, the oppressors, the spreaders of disease?

While he flung words like firebrands at the thirty-odd sailors and the excited throngs of maids standing by, a weighty question pounded at his consciousness. How could he hope to accomplish, with so small a number of followers, any destruction or other evil comparable to the mighty achievements of the other twelve?

Or were there larger forces somewhere awaiting his command? Did Graygortch have a plan for him—if he proved himself not too soft?

"Look what happened to McLoogin," he growled, hurling a gesture from his high left shoulder. "Yesterday I would have told you McLoogin was a man. Today I reverse that judgment. Any sailor on guard duty who lets an outsider walk into him with a gun deserves to have his flesh spattered over the cliff walls and eaten by flies.

"McLoogin, famed as the Irish Killer, took his thirty-three bump-offs to be a charm. He thought he was invul—*invulnerbullish.* He wasn't. Now he's done in. That's what comes of being overcocky. Tomorrow morning there'll be a ceremony but it won't be a funeral. It'll be a trapdoor disciplinary. For Killer McLoogin. Also for those two slippery roof-hoppers that are hidin' their carcasses somewhere over our heads in a tower that nobody but Graygortch and me ever sets foot in."

ROUSE paused to draw a husky breath. In the ranks of sailors, Schubert shuffled restlessly, refrained from whistling with difficulty.

"Let him give the works to all of Graygortch's candidates," thought Schubert. "It's no bones out of my spine—as long as he doesn't carry his damned discipline too far."

With a few brusque, arrogant statements Jag Rouse then laid his plan for a quick capture of the two men aloft.

"I'm the only one allowed to go up," he said. "I'm doing this job myself—taking all the risk that goes with it. But first I'll let you in on a secret. I'm not allowed to climb the stairs. I've never climbed the stairs with Graygortch. He goes alone. I have my own passage and it's plenty perilous. It's a hidden rope—eighty feet of it—straight up."

Rouse tapped the muscles of his arms, and watched the faces of his men light with envy.

"If we can smoke them out with a gong trick," Rouse went on, "I won't have to go up. If we can't, I'll climb the rope and bring them down dead or alive."

His blunt boast held the group for a moment in silence. He didn't bother to mention that the machine gunners on the roof would advance to the tower if gongs failed to smoke the men out. Secretly he knew he would arrive just as the machine guns nosed over the windows to distract the two culprits. That would let his pistol do the work. The machine gunners would look in to discover he had done it singlehanded.

"You have your orders," Rouse concluded. "Remember, for the first five minutes you're going to hear gongs—*as if* a squad of sailors was climbing the stairs. That'll be me at the gong switches. No storm, no earthquakes. Just a slick smokeout.

"If they should come down these stairs, you capture them. Take 'em alive unless they open fire. If they go the other way, the roof gunners will

drop 'em. If they sit tight in the top of the tower, they're my pepper salad."

CHAPTER XIII

Wrong Man on a Rope

AT THE top of the tower Hank Switcher ran circles around himself. Ross crawled the inner ledge beneath the open windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the rooftops.

The two men knew that the trap was closing in. Their minutes were numbered. That telltale gong had put them right back on the spot, and the appearance of men and machine guns on the roof proved that there would be no more time wasted in making the capture.

Ross had looped his lithe fifty-foot rope and fastened it around his body to be ready to travel if any way opened. Hank's nervous fingers had snapped a lace in putting his shoes on.

Ross chanced one more quick look through a window. He drew back with a jerk. Machine guns rattled from the roofs below. The bullets ricocheted through the tower. Chips and dust sprayed from the bluestone window frame.

"Almost lost my face that time," Ross said.

"I lost mine when I shot that guy," Hank moaned. "If I'd go ahead and give myself up, Ross, you could—"

"No point in giving up to machine guns," Ross snapped. "Besides, I'm in this thing neck-deep, the same as you are . . . Well, we've got two ways open —the stairs and the rope. Those guns out on the roof are Rouse's gentle way of telling us it's our move."

"The stairs, then," said Hank, displaying a couple handful of blisters. "I could no more climb down a rope— Dammit, I wish I could afford a jury —"

"Quit wishing," Ross barked. "Follow me."

Blonnng! The low note of the tower gong rang out. Ross felt the floor tremble under his feet.

"I'll let you down on this," Ross said, drawing up the long heavy rope with a series of lightning-swift pulls.

Blonnng! The second gong note thundered through the tower.

"They — they're coming up the stairs," Hank stammered. "Fast."

Ross brought up the last of the rope, threw a loop in the end for Hank to ride down on. "When you get to the bottom, hide out and wait for me. And don't breathe till I get there."

Hank poked a foot through the loop, let himself over the ledge. "Where does this shaft go to?"

"Down," said Ross. "That's all I can tell you."

The third gong note rang out.

ROSS paid out the rope, Hank slipped down into the velvet-walled blackness like a turtle on a plumb line. The fourth gong sounded. The last of the rope slipped over the dark ledge.

Three seconds later, Ross tugged at the rope and found that it swung free. That meant that Hank had found solid footing at the bottom. He must have slipped safely past the person or persons who were ascending the spiral stairs. Otherwise the gongs wouldn't keep clanging upward. The fifth one had already sounded.

Now the sixth rang out. It was a matter of seconds, Ross thought, until men and guns would reach the top of the stairs. Ross threw himself upon the mercy of the eighty-foot rope and climbed down.

The descent into the darkness seemed endless. The last two gongs sang out before he reached the bottom. He fully expected a tug at the rope from over-

head, but it didn't come. Suddenly his feet struck a floor.

"Hank!" he whispered. Everything was coal-black.

"Thank heavens!" Hank breathed, within five feet of him. "I thought they'd got you."

"It won't be long now," Ross retorted. Then with an explosive breath, "Say, Hank, did you hear any footsteps going up those stairs?"

"Holy smokes, I was too scared to listen."

"Well, something tells me—either these velvet curtains deadened the sound or else we've been tricked. I didn't hear any up-bound traffic—"

"Here it comes."

Noises filtered through from somewhere below—a confusion of men's voices.

"That loud one is Rouse," Ross whispered. "How much room have we got back here? We don't dare touch these curtains."

Ross made sure that the loop was removed from the end of the hanging rope, then he and Hank felt their way for a few feet, along the dusty floor between the draperies and the stone wall. It was a completely blind passage. Now they waited on their hands and knees in the pitch blackness. The sounds of heavy footsteps ascending unseen stairs were coming closer . . .

A FEW seconds earlier, Rouse had finished his clever work at the gong switchboard. He emerged from the little hidden room beneath the lowest flight of the spiral stairs, strode out into the circular plaza. Thirty-odd sailors leaped to their places in the starchy semicircle, clicked their heels, saluted.

Rouse paraded past them, stopped to salute the sailor who came running in from the east porch.

"They only gave us one shot, your honor," said the sailor. "After that they didn't show their faces."

"So the gongs didn't budge 'em," Rouse snorted. "All right. Go back and instruct them to carry out their orders to the full."

The sailor saluted, dashed out.

Rouse recrossed in front of the semicircle of sailors, shouting at them as he passed, hurling a few choice boasts. He was off to do the job himself.

He was still shouting when he reached the first step. He planted his foot on it, looked back, gave his crew a signal to hand him a cheer. They came through royally. No one envied him the task of a singlehanded capture of two mystery men who would probably shoot on sight.

Back of his bluster, Rouse was stalling for time. He knew what none of his cheerers knew –that the machine guns would move up just in time to put this singlehanded capture over.

Rouse stalled a moment longer than he meant to. A group of five maids caught his eye, and when one of them asked if he could really climb a rope all the way to the top of the tower, he took a minute's time-out for muscle demonstrating.

Then he marched up the steps, disappeared around the spiral.

Out of sight of the plaza, he slipped through the black velvet wall, groped through the blackness until his hands caught the rope's end, began climbing upward hand over hand . . .

MEANWHILE, the castle roof had become a scene of rapid action. The machine gunners, having advanced on the tower with ropes and ladders, nosed their guns through the open windows.

"Nobody home," the first gunner an-

nounced.

"Hold it," another warned. "We've not allowed inside the tower."

"But where'd the devils go? They couldn't have beat it down the stairs without ringing gongs."

"Look—a rope." One of the sailors grinned proudly over his discovery. "The slippery monkeys—"

He gave a tug at the rope, found it weighted down like an anchor. He emitted a whooping shout.

"I've got 'em right here, men! Give me a hand. We'll bring 'em back."

Three sailors crowded the window, drew upward on the rope, which began to sway fitfully from side to side.

"Feel 'em kicking, the damned—Oh-oh! What happened?"

"They shook loose!"

"They fell. I heard the thump."

The three machine gunners looked at each other blankly. The rope, though its lower end was too deep down in the blackness to be seen, unquestionably swung free. The three sailors released it.

Just then a fourth member of the gun squad made his way up the ladder to a window. He looked into the empty tower room.

"Where's Rouse? . . . *Get away from that rope, you saps! That's Rouse's way up.*"

The three sailors exchanged quick nudges. In that moment they gulped themselves into a permanent silence. Nobody would ever know they had touched that rope—not if they could help it. . . .

"WHAT was that thump?" Hank asked in a whisper.

"Hsssh!" Ross was barely breathing. For a moment everything was silent. The comfort of all this blackness, with no gongs or footsteps or machine guns to puncture the quiet, gave Hank Switcher's imagination a chance to unclog.

"When I was playing in the Kansas City Depression Band," Hank whispered, "we had an old bass drum with one head knocked out, and it made a thump just like—"

A low painful groan sounded. It came from within ten feet of where the two men were crouched.

"That's Rouse," said Ross. "He fell from the rope."

"The hell! What's the trick this time?"

"Listen. The fellow's in a bad way."

They crept through the darkness toward the groans.

"Careful," Hank warned, hanging back. "He'll shoot us on sight."

"Maybe he's too busted up to shoot," Ross said. "Anyway we'd better give him a hand. Otherwise this mishap'll be on our heads too."

The big man was groaning like the lion that got a thorn in its foot, Hank thought. The lion in the story had been grateful for help. But somehow Hank wasn't so sure it would work out that way in this case. The lion and this Rouse were two different beasts.

"Lift the drapery," Ross ordered. "Let's get some light on this fellow."

Hank pulled up an edge of the black velvet and light reflected in from the red carpeted stairs.

"Take it easy, fellow," Ross advised.

The big man tried to raise himself off his back. His eyes, only half open, betrayed a treacherous mood of rage mingled with pain. He tried to reach, as if for a weapon. His effort unleased an awful groan, and for an instant his eyes went shut.

Then he lurched and began fighting the darkness with his good left arm. Ross flew at that arm with both hands, pinned it to the big fellow's side. By this time the fallen man was roaring

like a mad man.

But Ross and Hank stayed with him and succeeded in binding him with the rope, left arm, knees and feet. The right arm and shoulder were too badly broken to be dangerous.

"We couldn't handle you without tying you, fellow," said Ross, speaking in a low impassionate voice, as if Jag Rouse were just another fractious guest at the Transient Hotel. "We'll have to get those bones set right away."

Hank and Ross picked the big man up and carried him down the stairs to the South Pole plaza.

A wide circle of sailors and several clusters of maids and houseworkers stood waiting, marveling to see these two mystery men walk into voluntary capitivity, marveling even more to discover how loud their Captain Rouse could groan. Something had slipped, all right; but no sailor doubted that every groan from Jag Rouse would be paid for.

CHAPTER XIV

Trapdoor to Death

"A TRAPDOOR ceremony tomorrow!"

The rumor went the rounds in whispers. It might as well have been rung out from tower gongs. Within thirty minutes after Rouse, propped up in a chair, began to talk, the news had spread to all the castle's inhabitants.

In the kitchen department the maids broke dishes and spilled wines and mixed salt and sugar. Fantella scolded them for being nervous. But she cut her finger while paring potatoes for tomorrow's dinner, and her peeled potatoes ran to cubes.

Little bells kept ringing all evening long, there was so much coming and going throughout the castle. The sailors quarreled louder than usual over their games both in the recreation wing of the castle and out on the lighted hockey court.

The hockey games ran far into the night. Partly because some of the sailors claimed that during the day they had seen a lone girl approaching the gate—a rare occurrence. It was while on the rooftop that they had seen her, and they assumed she had been frightened away. Still, she might come back. If so, there were numerous members of Rouse's guard who would want her to have their version of a sociable welcome.

But the important reason that hockey and other games lasted late was that no one was in the mood to sleep, knowing that a trapdoor disciplinary ceremony was scheduled for the following morning.

The job of caring for the savage patient fell to Fantella.

"Dot man takes more pampering dan der baby in three-cornered pants," she stewed as she prepared a midnight snack for him. "Hass to haf his soup chust so colt, chust so hot. Hiss pipe I haf to put in his teeth and light. Hiss head I haf to prop up. Der mirrors I haf to fix so he can keep der eye on Graygortch's shadow."

"What about setting his broken bones?" asked one of the maids. "Did you do that too?"

"Dot I did not," Fantella grunted "All der bone-setting vas done by dot tall young 'Merican. He say der bones needs der doctor mit der extra-ray."

"You mean X-ray, Fantella."

Fantella whirled to see Vivian standing in the doorway, clad in pajamas and dressing-gown.

"And vot, young lady, might you be doing avake dis time uff night?"

"I couldn't sleep, Fantella," said the girl.

"Couldn't sleep, iss it? You got nutting to vorry about."

"Fantella, I want to talk with you," Vivian said. The two or three maids, finishing the kitchen clean-up, left the room for the night.

VIVIAN'S voice lowered to a whisper. "When you take breakfast to Ross Bradford—"

"Der tall young 'Merican?"

"Yes—will you tell him something for me? The guards won't let me through to the living room."

"You better not let Captain Rouse know dot you haf secrets—"

"Tell him I've thought it over about living here. Tell him I'm going to take his advice—I'm going to run away from the castle."

"Nonsense. I don't tell no such lies," Fantella snapped. She picked up her tray and started off. But in the doorway she turned, eyed the girl critically. "Nonsense," she repeated, but this time it sounded like a question. "To bed mit you, child."

"And tell him," Vivian said, clutching the old lady's arm with her trembling fingers, "that whatever happens to him, tomorrow, I only hope it will happen *instantly.*"

By two o'clock in the night the castle was quiet. Fantella took a tray of tea to Rouse only to find him asleep. She returned by way of the old living room where the two American prisoners were sitting, tied hand and foot to their chairs.

"Vell, vat nice comforts we haf for our guests," she said looking scornfully at the ropes. "Maybe you could drink der cup uff tea?"

"I could drink pickle juice," said Hank, as the old lady put the cup to his lips.

"Fantella," said Ross, "would you deliver a couple of messages for me?"

"Vat am I playing, postal office?"

"No kissing games," Hank interposed. "My arms are tied."

"Will you tell Vivian that whatever becomes of me, I'm crazy about her," said Ross. "If I ever break out of here —"

"I know. You would make her run away."

"Exactly. How'd you know?"

"She say I vas to tell you dot's her idea too. She say she vill go, der liddle liar. How could she, mit guards effrywhere?"

"If I could bet back to my room—"

"You von't get oudt no more, Meester Brafford. Your oudting days iss ofer, I could tell you dot. But Vivian, she vish you quick luck."

The old lady gave Ross a sip of tea. Then she started to go. The sailors on the night guard shift were sauntering back and forth beyond the living room doors.

"One more message, Fantella," Ross added in a low voice. "I want you to tell Jimpson—"

The old lady's fat arms twitched as if they had struck something hot.

"Jimpson?" She swallowed the word with a mighty effort at innocence.

"The crippled man who climbs up the precipice," said Ross. "I have some confidences with him the same as you do. Whatever happen to us tomorrow, I want you to tell him everything. Sometime—maybe after the war is over—someone from the United States might come here and inquire what became of us."

"Vat happens to you—yess." The old lady nodded dubiously. "Meester Brafford and Meester—"

"Switcher. Hank Switcher," said Ross.

"I vill remember," said Fantella, and walked out . . .

IN SPITE of the painful bonds on his wrists and ankles, Ross was almost asleep when the old man entered the room.

"Look who's coming," Hank whispered. "What's this old grandpa walking around for this time of night?"

Ross looked up with a start. "Coming in to strike up a conversation, maybe. He looks harmless and peaceful enough. A pleasant contrast to these hard-boiled sailors."

"He acts like he's asleep." Ross frowned thoughtfully. "There's something about that face—"

"New to me," Hank whispered. "I'll bet he's ninety years old."

Ross noted that the guards now stood stiffly in the living room doorways, keeping a watch on this old man but making no effort to direct him or prohibit him from going where he pleased. Apparently he had the run of the house.

The old fellow was dressed in bedroom slippers, old gray trousers, a heavy white woolen sweater with a collar pushed high around his gaunt brown throat. His long bony fingers combed feebly through his smudgy gray hair.

Hank was right, the man was walking in his sleep. At least his eyes were only half open, and the leathery webs of wrinkles were gathered so closely around them that they seemed to repulse the outside world. The rather large head held up with an air of dignity, almost nobility. This loftiness of carriage seemed strange in a man so feeble.

The man paused to stretch his hands toward the dead fireplace, and for a moment the light of the green shaded floor lamp was full on his face. His long sharp nose, his thin lips, his pallid cheeks were highlighted. The light covering of white whiskers did not hide the gauntness of his jaw or the deep-cut lines surrounding his mouth.

"He doesn't see us," Hank whispered.

The old man crossed slowly to the right side of the fireplace and with much care settled himself in an old yellow chair before a table of checkers. There he sat for several minutes, resting his lofty head in his hands.*

FINALLY he looked over toward Ross and Hank. He looked their way three or four times in the minutes that followed, never seeming to see them, yet seeming slightly disturbed at the inescapable fact of their presence.

At last he spoke a few deep guttural words that were directed to no one in particular.

"Is Doc around? . . . Tell him I'll play one more game . . . I'm pretty tired . . . I'll have to go soon . . . But I'll hold on . . . long enough . . . to play . . ."

The guards kept sharp eyes on the old man during this monolog. But no one spoke.

"I can't understand," the old man said finally in a low sad voice, "what's keeping Doc."

Ross wished he were close enough to whisper to Hank. He wondered if Hank shared the strange sensations that suddenly flooded through him. He was moved by a fathomless sympathy for

*Apparently a form of hypnosis causes this phenomenon. A patient may be directed, during hypnosis, to carry out certain actions after the "spell" has been broken, and he will do so without himself realizing that he is carrying out an order.

It is also possible here that the old man is under a common delusion of old age, when death has been long-deferred, that he is living in the past. The scenes and memories of the past become real, and the result is a complete obliteration of the present insofar as recognition of its existence is concerned. The mind causes the body to go through actions that are a part of the past. Thus the old man probably really believed there was a fire to warm his hands. Such delusions have led to belief in dual personalities, although this has never been proved.—Ed.

this old man.

There was something so strong and fine about that deep-lined face, and yet something vastly troubled. Back in the Transient Hotel days, Ross had ministered to more than one man hungering for human comfort in his dying hours. So many of those poor fellows during the Depression years had fought their way step by step across the country from one night's lodging to another with death but a short distance behind.

The mark of death, gray and hollow, was stamped on the face of the sleeping man, thought Ross.

Abruptly, the sleeper turned toward Ross and Hank and addressed them.

"You are strangers. Did you come to help dig my grave? . . . I think I'm ready . . . Doc isn't coming . . . Now would be a good time . . ."

The old man started to bend his head down on his folded arms.

A guard moved halfway through a door and a little bell rang. On the instant the old man's whole attitude changed. He drew his head up abruptly, stiffly. The webs around his eyes distended, his eyes grew bright, almost luminous.

"Wide awake," Hank muttered.

Ross drew a sharp breath. The man's sudden change of demeanor stunned him like an electrical shock. It was the same face, indeed, but it was different. The mouth had hardened, the eyes had assumed a glow of hatred. There was something snakelike in the old man's bearing as he arose from his chair.

"So this is Graygortch!" Ross said to himself. "Strange—"

The old man moved out of the room feebly. The guards at the doorways relaxed. The night hours passed on. . . .

MORNING brought the dreaded trapdoor disciplinary ceremony.

Everyone excepting Graygortch, Vivian, and the sailors on gate duty assembled on the overhanging porch. Ross and Hank, still bound to their chairs, were pushed to the northwest corner of the rectangular floor. A stiff sea breeze swept in across the porch railing and whipped their hair across their faces.

Rouse marched back and forth, waving the arm that wasn't bound up with bandages, keeping his sailors on the jump to obey orders.

Within a few minutes Rouse called for a chair. His side was troubling him, and his arm was a painful weight. But once settled, he carried on with a vigorous roar that was calculated to scare guilt into the most innocent of his inferiors.

While the line was being chalked along the floor parallel to the rail, Rouse tried out the trapdoor mechanism. He had a sailor stand on the square section of floor, walk across it, jump on it. The square was obviously solid. Then he warned everyone to stand back while he plugged in the electric switch cord. He pressed the switch. The double-winged doors that formed the floor-square swung downward, remained open for a second, flew back to re-form the solid floor.

Everything was ready.

Rouse called off the names of his sailors, one by one. Each man, as his name was called, marched down the chalk line until Rouse's bark halted him on the trapdoor square. There he would stand, facing the breathless onlookers, waiting for Rouse's further orders.

"No charges," Rouse would say. "Forward march."

Several sailors walked the disciplinary chalkline safely before Rouse called the name, "McLoogin."

Four sailors dragged the dead body of Killer McLoogin to the trapdoor square. The body lay there, naked

chested. One of the sailors had pulled the sailor middy up to cover the shapeless face.

"You're charged with carelessness in the line of duty, McLoogin," Captain Rouse snarled at the corpse. "You're dead because you let yourself get slipped up on. But that don't make you any less guilty. This is a bum mark for a man supposed to be familiar with the killin' game. What've you got to say for yourself?"

Some of the sailors snorted at this exhibition. The captain was enjoying the effect.

"Nothin' to say? Just as I thought. All right. You're guilty. I consign you to the depths."

Rouse held the electric switch cord in his hand, but he looked around to see whether the dead McLoogin had any friends who were going to object to this conviction. It was an old stunt of his to call on objectors to press the switch. His eye lighted on a suspect. He called the sailor over.

"Press it," he said.

The sailor took the cord, pressed the switch. The trapdoor flew open. The dead sailor fell through.

ROSS listened, thinking he might hear the body strike the water five hundred feet below. But all of the onlookers broke into an applause and it was impossible to hear anything else. Applauding seemed to be the proper way to square one's judgment with that of Captain Rouse.

"That man next," said Rouse, pointing into the corner. "The stubby one."

Sailors cut the cords that bound Hank Switcher.

Hank walked the chalkline with difficulty.

"Halt!" said Rouse. "Right face."

Hank was standing in the center of the trapdoor square, facing Rouse.

"You're charged with trespassing the honorable Graygortch's tower top. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Well, I—" Hank choked on his words.

"You're guilty," said Rouse. He cast an eye toward a group of sailors. "Come here, Schubert. The honor's yours."

Schubert swaggered over. The bit of melody from his teeth was barely audible to Ross. Ross fought to break his ropes. The cords cut deep. He felt the blood grow wet on his wrists.

Schubert nonchalantly pressed the switch. The trapdoor dropped open. Hank Switcher, scrambling wildly, fell out of sight. The trapdoor flew closed.

"The other fellow next," Rouse growled.

The cords were cut from Ross' arms and legs. Before he knew it he was walking the chalkline. Rouse halted him over the trapdoor square.

"You're guilty on the same grounds," said Rouse. "Press the switch, Schubert."

Schubert pressed the switch.

(To be concluded next month)

What is the mystery of the castle of Flinfiord? What weird purpose is behind the strange man Graygortch? What causes the terrible storms, the earthquakes? What have they to do with the war that now sweeps the earth? Has Jag Rouse reached the pinnacle of his evil deeds? Will the strange cripple, Jimpson have still more "statistics" to gather? Here in this castle, with its mixture of medieval superstition and modern science, something tremendous is occurring that will have far-reaching consequences on all the world. Who, or what *is Bill Graygortch?*

Don't fail to read the final 30,000 words of this tremendous novel by your favorite author. Next month!

Four freighters in the convoy blow up with tremendous force

Rocket

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

"IF MARS knew of this G-takeoff, she'd bomb St. Louis till there wasn't even a flea alive on a rat," grumbled the ground sergeant, watching freighter after freighter into space.

"Mars doesn't dare," replied the ground-major. "She'll only wait for the fleet to clear, and bomb that. Nobody expects a single hull to come out anywhere near Jupiter."

"No?" the ground-sergeant looked stupid. "What then?"

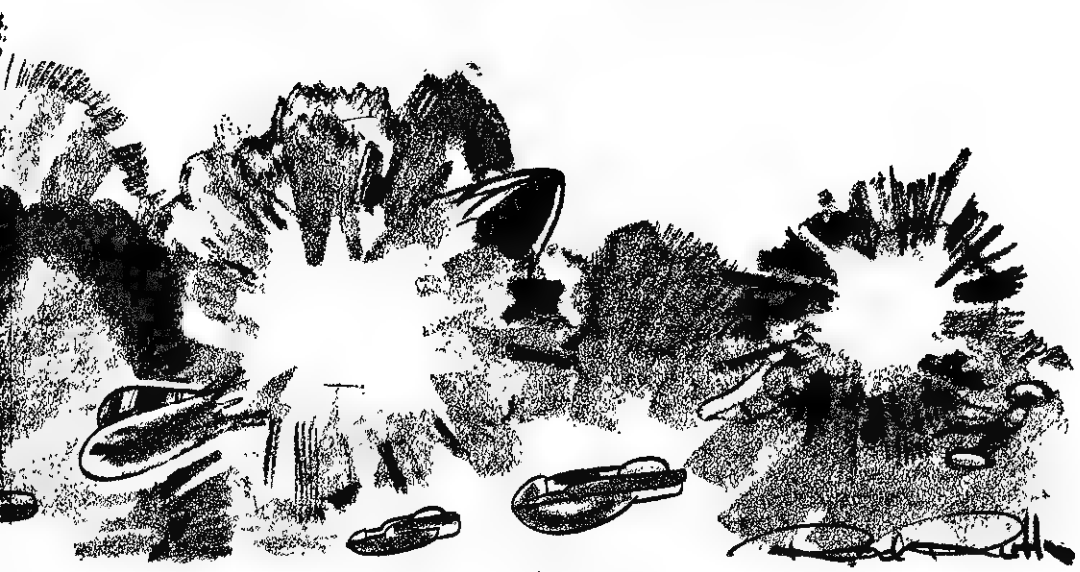
"We'll fire another bunch," replied the ground-major grimly. "Tell them to load those black ships into the takeoff."

"I get it," said the ground-sergeant suddenly. "Black ships—hard to see in 'tween-world space—but why is this convoy all burnished? Do they want the Martians to see—"

"Exactly," nodded his superior. "They want the Martians to see. Concentrate. And the black convoy, really freighted for our Jovian colonies, will get through . . . there goes the last ship. Destroyer. Don't think it won't do plenty of destroying before it gets destroyed."

CAPTAIN KILRAIN, young and as spare as a spider, struck the "full ahead" combination on the destroyer's control keys and relaxed in the operator's chair. On the shoulders of his tunic shone brand-new double bars, in-

CAPTAIN KILRAIN knew that there would be no returning from this convoy, because he knew what the freighters were carrying . . .



signia of a space-skipper. His wiry length of body was so youthful as to seem almost undeveloped, but his thin, sharp face had deep intent lines, and his eyes were the hot blue of two new rocket-nozzles.

He said into the mike of the speaker system: "Attention, all hands. Assemble in control room!"

They entered from various doors, quickly but not smartly. There were four, strikingly similar in sullenness but different in size, shape and complexion. They formed a single line, staring.

"Attention to roll-call," said Kilrain. "Johnston?"

"Yo!" deeply responded the tall, splay-shouldered Yankee at the left of the line.

"Gaul?"

"Yo!" echoed a slender man with sleek hair and moustache.

"Ollendorf?"

"Yah!" grunted a thickset tow-head.

"Mohay?"

"Iah!" grinned the black-skinned Melanesian giant at the right, narrowing his beady eyes.

"You know, men, why we're here, and what's expected of us," began Kilrain formally, when he was roughly interrupted.

"We know right well, skipper," said Yank Johnston for them all. Unbidden, he stepped a pace forward. "We've all been tried, condemned -then transferred aboard this destroyer—"

"Exactly," Kilrain purred, very dangerous himself. "This is one of the new class, finest of light battle craft. Automatic engines, fuel feed, alarm signals, all that. No stoking, mixing, sentry-go. Nobody has to do anything except fight."

"That's it!" cried Johnston hotly. "Fight! They're sending us into some impossible spot, with all the Martians in the universe laying for us—this is a dead man's rocket!"

"Yah!" supplemented Ollendorf, and Mokay nodded his bushy black head. Gaul snickered jauntily.

"I know it," said Kilrain. His lean forefinger tapped his new insignia. "Know why I've just been promoted captain? Because I killed a brother officer."

They all fell silent, gazing in wonder. He continued:

"We both liked the same girl. She wasn't even worth bad words. But before I learned that, there was a fight. And I killed him. Court-martial said —death. I asked to be allowed to kill myself. Better than official execution. They gave me promotion, assignment to this craft and mission."

He jerked his thumb toward the vessel's nose. "Those freighters we're convoying—they're loaded with explosives, full cargo. Enough to wreck a whole Martian super-fleet. Not a man aboard. Remote steering controls, radio-beamed to us. See how we're fixed?"

"Fixed to die," replied Johnston hoarsely.

"Head of the class, you big Yank. But to die hard. Meanwhile, their blockade fleets will be all wrapped up in us. A real convoy will whip by and

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* Only one rocket port of all Earth had the Gatling Takeoff—St. Louis, the World League's capital. In the center of the metal-plated space harbor was a round hole, as in all such ports—the outgoing ship would lodge stern down there, like an egg in a cup, so that the initial rocket blast would have an enclosure of tough alloy against which to concentrate and hurl the craft skyward. The ingenious difference here lay in the presence, beneath the plating, of a full dozen tubular housings for ships, set around a pivot. Working in the under-corridors, port crews would load a ship into each tube, then turn the whole like the cylinder of an old-fashioned revolver.

As each ship came into line with the opening, it would spring into space. A dozen craft launched, brief seconds apart . . . the only trouble was that there should be many such devices, in these war times when speed and volume of shipping became so important. -Ed.

to our colonies on Io, Europa, Ganymede—food and munitions for the garrisons standing off the Martians there."

"I get it," said Johnston, still the spokesman. "But why should we die to help those government swine who hung the rap on us? Why not blow up everything here—now—"

"Because I'm the only man aboard who knows how to work the remote control beams," said Kilrain. "And I'm in command." His tube-metal eyes assailed Johnston's and the big Yankee's gaze faltered.

"Dead man's rocket," repeated Kilrain. "Happy phrase. That's what it is, for all. For me, besides—suicide rocket. I asked to be here."

The warning-box buzzed. Kilrain turned to it, quickly twisted a dial. The vision screen lighted. It was full of the weaving, darting images of many rakish craft.

"Martians coming," he said. "In sight. As quick as that. Battle stations, all!"

They sped in four directions. Kilrain smiled secretly.

"Grousers," he apostrophized his companions. "Criminals. But they're ready to fight—hard—spite of themselves."

BUT the Martian force did not attack, or even wait to give battle. The ships retired rapidly before the advance of the convoy.

"Afraid of us, sir!" came the voice of the gay-moustached Gaul through the receiver-system from the port gun. It was the first cheerful tone heard aboard the destroyer since takeoff.

"I wonder," replied Kilrain into the transmitter. "Eight or ten armed ships—at least two of them big—only one of us recognizably a fighter. We hadn't even time to come to the head of the line. No. Something deep." He glanced at the danger-signal board, from which warning lights faded. "They're retired out of range. Stand easy, all."

He relaxed again, but his brain remained furiously active. A whole space-flight of enemy fighters had retired without even skirmishing. They had observed only. Kilrain understood—attack on a convoy this close to Earth might be only partially successful. Some, at least, could retreat to home ports. What Mars wanted was to catch this group out in space, beyond support or hiding. Then—oblivion for the ships of Earth. Kilrain grinned. His own commanders wanted that, too. Everybody would be happy.

He speeded up, drawing the destroyer to flank position beside the file of freighters. He checked the dozen groupings of extra control-keys that would direct those crewless ships. He then took time to review the general space-situation.

Mars was on the far side of the sun, in opposition; the Jovian moons in conjunction, of course—minimum flying distance from Earth about three hundred and eighty million miles. The convoy was proceeding at fifteen miles a second—would double that speed in an hour, double it again in three hours, reach the maximum of one hundred and fifty miles per second within a day. A month at top speed, and they'd brake off to land at Io, Ganymede or Europa, where Earth's colonists stood off the long-range attacks of Mars, and hungered for supplies. . . .

No. He'd forgotten. They were flying a suicide rocket, they weren't meant to make port. First divert, then damage as much as possible, the Martian blockading force in Jovian space-latitudes. Meanwhile another convoy was following. It carried food, weapons, materials, would gain port, be welcomed by the colonists. Perhaps somebody

would tell the diversion that made the successful trip possible.

He glanced at a chronometer. It was noon, St. Louis time.

"Mess ho!" he cried into his mike. "All ready for us—assemble at control room."

The food was ready in sealed containers, hot, savory. At the next meal, more containers would be forthcoming. No cooks needed, no waiters. No sentries, no engineers, no stokers. Only five fighting men, who would fight a final battle and die at the end of it, for the sake of a clever government plan to supply the far-off Jovian colonies.

JUST beyond the asteroids, and just within the orbit of Jupiter, the materials of that final battle waited.

Only Martians in Martian ships might endure the long wait of months, perhaps years, in such a quarter of space while the tedious inter-world war was being fought. Bred on a starved planet, Martians need very little food, and that synthetic. Again, with take-off ports on Diemos and Phobos, almost gravityless, their craft can be loaded with vast stores of rocket fuel, enough to maintain them indefinitely between worlds.

And so, having tried to invade Earth's colonies on the larger Jovian moons, and being beaten back by the sternly manned defenses, the fleet remained in an orbit of its own, just sunward of Jupiter. Terrestrial colonists were deadly with ray and bomb and electro-automatic firearms, but Terrestrial colonists are hearty eaters. Let their supply ships fail, and victory would come to Mars. . . .

As the convoy approached, Kilrain was warned by buzz-signal, then by a glow of light on his alarm-board, and finally by a view, in his vision screen, of the far-off fleet like crumbs of reflected fire in the black sky. He judged that there were at least five giant battleships, big as the ocean liners of ancient times; a dozen or more cruisers only less large and powerful; and swarms of light destroyers and scouts —a hundred vessels, say, all aware of him and heading his way.

"Attention!" he called to his four companions, who lolled glumly about the control room. "Enemy in sight, in large numbers. Man the battle stations."

Yank Johnston, who once before had scurried to obey such an order, had taken time to sulk since. He spat on the floor-plates. "Why should we?" he grumbled.

"Yah," seconded Ollendorf from the opposite corner, "why should—"

Kilrain had locked his controls, and rose swiftly. He slipped around the desklike control board and threw himself.

Yank Johnston had interrupted Ollendorf. "What I mean to say is, since we haven't got a snowball's chance in—" he was amplifying, when the impact of his skipper's body interrupted him in turn. Kilrain's lean hand found and closed on Johnston's throat. The shock of his charge carried the mutineer back and almost down.

"Stations, you others!" yelled Kilrain over his shoulder. They scuttled away, even Ollendorf. Then Johnston had recovered and struck his skipper hard under the ear, knocking him loose from his strangle hold. Alone in the control room, they fought.

Smaller than Johnston but faster, Kilrain would have been well advised to dance away and spar cleverly, but he knew he had not the time. He must win quickly, decisively. And so he rushed again, crouching low and avoiding Johnston's powerful swings. He struck deep into the pit of the Yankee's stom-

ach, slipped inside another deadly smash, and clutched the outthrust forearm in both his hands. A cunning twist, a jerk across his shoulder, and he had twitched Johnston from his feet, throwing him heavily.

"HAD enough?" demanded Kilrain. The tube-metal eyes were flashing pale fires.

"Haven't had hardly any yet!" gritted Johnston, rolling over and coming to his feet. But suddenly he stared past Kilrain.

"Skipper!" he said hoarsely. "The Martians—they're making a basket formation—it's on the vision screen, I can see it!"

"Old trick, Johnston," grinned Kilrain. "I won't look behind me."

"But it's true—I can see. They want to *capture* us! I didn't come to be captured by any slimy snaky Martian—" Johnston backed up. "I'm going to my station. I'll fight. But if we get through—alive—we'll take this up again!"

He was gone to the forward station. Kilrain turned back to his keyboard. Four red lights showed that the weapon positions were manned, ready.

Now to study the picture in the vision-screen. The Martians were making a basket, all right. Four of the mighty egg-shaped battle-giants were spaced like the corners of the square, with the lines filled in by ranks of smaller craft. These smaller ones made hazy vibrations—they danced in air, at a speed of miles per second, blurring a great space, almost occupying several points at once. The rest of the fleet strung out behind, in open order, to make a sort of network bag. At the rear apex was the fifth battleship. That would be the flagship, directing the maneuvers. Rushing upon the handful of Terrestrial craft, the basket formation would scoop up the ships like minnows in a net. Scant hundreds of miles in space—seconds in time—separated the two forces.

Kilrain cut speed. Sixty miles a second, twenty, ten, seven. The whole fabric of his destroyer hummed and groaned and protested with the backward surge of the brake rockets. One hand hovered on his steering controls, the other moved swiftly among the remote controls of the freighters. He changed the single-file formation slightly, with three leaders falling into a common front. His own ship he brought in close to the main body.

His mind visualized the freighter-formation as a javelin, his own destroyer the warrior who poised and wielded it. Basket against spear. . . .

HIS radio became vocal, with the metallic drone of a Martian's artificial voice:

"Ahoy, Earrth convoy! You have one opportunity to surrender. You cannot esscape —"

"Can't I, though?" muttered Kilrain all to himself. He was increasing speed again, for destroyer and freighters alike. The vision screen showed the Martians slowing up correspondingly, as though bracing themselves for actual impact. Actual impact was what Kilrain was ready to furnish. He hurled his entire space-group, like the javelin he visualized, at the big flagship of the Martian fleet.

For a moment he was within the basket-formation. Then the Martian flagship was emitting rosy flashes—the bomb-throwers were at work. Kilrain's sentry devices, tuned to many notes, gave twittering alarms—radio bombs were being guided upon him. One of the destroyer's big electro-automatics made a coughing sound of detonation.

"Who fired without my order?" de-

manded Kilrain into the mike.

"Me, sir," answered Gaul. "Roving bomb—exploded it—"

The destroyer bucked and swung almost around in airless space. Kilrain frantically keyed it back into course. He did not need to glance at his indicators to know that one of the lead freighters, part of his javelin-head, had been bombed. The vision screen showed that the Martians were amazed at the tremendous explosion of the ship, for there was a momentary cessation of raying and bombing. Kilrain stabbed his two lead vessels forward, into the concentration at the apex of the basket.

He touched two red-starred keys, one after another. Again his destroyer leaped and bounded like a porpoise, and the screen was full of pale fire. Among the lighter craft very close to the Martian flagship his lead freighters had exploded, smashing the fabric of the formation. The rest of Kilrain's convoy lanced through the great hole.

"We must have got ten or twelve—perhaps sixteen," decided Kilrain. The vision screen showed that they had zipped clear of the snare, and that a cloud of light fighters pursued like angry hornets.

"Ssurrrenderr!" slurred the Martian voice he had heard before. Kilrain kept silent. "Ssurrrenderr," repeated the voice, "orr—"

The foremost leash of Martian pursuers closed in upon the rearmost of Kilrain's freighters. To the captain's lined young face came one of his bitter grins. He touched another red-starred key.

Yet again a shaking explosion. Working back on to course, Kilrain saw in the screen a score of flaming points in space—wrecked Martian vessels. Those behind closed in more slowly.

The young skipper shifted to the freighter controls. One ship he abruptly reversed, hurling it and its cargo of destruction among the Martians. Then another. He exploded both by guess, for the screen showed mighty swelling clouds in space—cauliflower-shaped puffs of vapor, thrown off by the wrecked vessels. But each freighter, ripping to pieces, took Martians with it. Yet again Kilrain permitted himself to smile. Six transports gone—and at least sixty Martians. If—

Something smashed against the destroyer.

KILRAIN somersaulted twice out of his chair, bruising cheek and shoulder on a bulkhead, and struggled back to his post half-dazed. Something was wrong at once—artificial gravity-pull in the floor lessened, a breeze stirred the room that spoke of a leak somewhere. He gained the transmitter.

"What happened?" he demanded of it. "Yank Johnston?"

"Don't know," growled the malcontent forward.

"Gaul?"

"Hit of some sort—random bomb, I think, sir."

"Mohay?"

"Don't know, sarr," replied the Melanesian from starboard.

"Ollendorf?"

No answer.

"They've hit the rear turret," decided Kilrain at once. "Johnston! Mohay! Double back here!"

He set his controls, and led the two along the passageway aft.

The panel to the rear turret was closed, and its seams emitted a sucking sound.

"No air beyond that," grumbled Johnston. "Poor old Ollendorf—done for. The whole turret must be gone."

"And they've damaged or shot off one of the rear tubes," amplified Kilrain. He stamped on the floor-plates, which

slanted beneath them. "See how we're changing direction? Bearing right. We'll curve back toward the Martians."

"True," agreed Mohay. "We'll meet them—hit them—"

"And wind up this farce quick," finished Yank Johnston. But Kilrain shook his head.

"Another convoy, with real supplies, is on the way past. We're to occupy these Martians until that other convoy's safe. We need time. Let's mend the tube."

"I'll go," said Johnston at once.

"Stay here and man your weapons," Kilrain commanded him. "I'm the rocket mechanic—"

"I was mechanic's mate aboard the—" Johnston broke off. "Never mind. It's a two-man job. We'll both go."

"I told you to stay," reminded Kilrain bleakly.

"There's something to settle between us," flung back Johnston. "Doesn't look like the Martians will leave us to settle it at leisure. I say I'll go where you are—prove I'm as good a man—"

"Right." The bleakness was out of the skipper's face and voice. "Break out space-armor. Mohay, caulk this door, and get back to your station." He hurried back to his radio. "Gaul! Double back here and take controls. Johnston and I are going outside to mend the mechanism."

QUICKLY he and Johnston got into loose airtight overalls, gauntlets, belts of tools, glassite helmets with attached tanks and radios, magnetized boots. Kilrain led the way into the air-lock and emerged into space, Johnston close behind. The big Yankee carried a new tube-nozzle from the machine locker, three feet long and six-inch bore.

Together they hurried aft over the curve of the hull. They saw at once that the aft turret was gone, and Ollendorf with it, leaving only a dented emptiness behind. Just beyond, only three of the rear tubes jetted—upper, lower, port. The starboard tube was fused into clinker by the heat-power of the bomb.

"Superficial injury—nozzle only," diagnosed Kilrain into the transmitter that dangled before his lips. He glanced beyond the damaged stern. The Martian fleet, like a galaxy of strange stars, spread out afar in the velvet sky. It shifted as he looked, swung a little to Kilrain's left—to the destroyer's right.

"We're curving, as I said," continued Kilrain. "Unless we fix the tube—"

"Didn't we come out to fix it?" snapped Yank Johnston via his own set. "Have you got an insulated wrench, skipper?"

He knelt on the damaged plating and labored furiously. Kilrain's earphones picked up a baffled curse or two, then a grunt of triumph—the damaged nozzle was unshipped and went sailing away into space. The pent-up rocket flame bloomed afresh, and Johnston skilfully edged the new nozzle over and around the blast. Kilrain gave him new bolts and studs, glancing aft again—the Martians, he judged, were making a new basket, but a large one. The ship sailed smoothly—and then the whole universe bucked and danced and glared, as one of the four remaining freighters blew up.

The Martian fast craft still pursued. One was closing in from starboard. Kilrain knelt quickly, seizing a bracket to steady himself, and drawing his electro-automatic pistol. A ray stabbed out over Kilrain's shoulder, and missed contact—Mohay was trying to defend, from the starboard weapon station. Other Martians followed to close quar-

ters. Another bomb, another freighter exploded. Then more bombs. Kilrain fired again and again. He hit and exploded two bombs, missed a third.

That third struck somewhere, in a brilliancy that blinded and shocked.

KILRAIN was knocked flat, but he never lost consciousness. His grip on the bracket saved him. Yank Johnston was jolted into space, kicking and floundering, but Kilrain caught his ankle, drawing him back to where his magnetic boots would take hold. They turned together, and saw where the bomb had scored.

No more starboard turret, no more Mohay. There was a jagged hole where the main hatch-panel had been, and a gush of vapor that vanished as they looked. The destroyer was cracked wide open, all its air gone. No more Gaul, either. The two gained the lip of the jagged hole, crept through. No air, no light, no gravity equalization.

"Keep your boots on," said Kilrain into the helmet transmitter. "These rigs will keep us alive for a while—"

"Long enough to smack over a few more Martians, sir!" growled Johnston's voice in his earphones. "Let's throw those last two freighters in where they'll do the most good."

"There's only one left," said Kilrain, at the control board. "I see a single control key up—that bomb that hit us must have finished a freighter, too." He switched on an electric lamp at his belt, and looked. Destroyer controls responded to his fingers. Remote freighter controls—there were none. A flying fragment of wreckage had shorn them away.

"Yank," he said, "our hookup's gone."

Yank Johnston clambered over a mass of overturned equipment to a port. "I see the one freighter—still coming along beside us—"

"The power's still on, though we can't guide her," replied Kilrain. "Our rockets—" He checked quickly. "We can still fly this wreck, and—"

"Ahoy, desstrroyerr!"

The rasping voice of the Martian commander again rang in his earphones. Kilrain quickly attached his transmission line to the control-board radio.

"Ahoy, yourself," he replied. "Well, we're harder to kill than you think. Still alive. Still fighting."

"Yourr rrayss arre gone," gloated the enemy chief. "Yourr sship cannot fight orr flee. Again I ssummon you to ssurrenderr."

The television still worked. Gloved hand on the dial, Kilrain took a whirling viewpoint of space around him. The Martian spoke truth—flight was as much out of the question as fight. The whole armada had rushed forward, was closing around him and his sole remaining freighter. He was the center of a hollow ball many miles in diameter—a ball whose shell was a spreading of warships, each armed and ready to destroy him.

He sparred for time. "I hear you," he said into the transmitter. "Why are you so merciful? Why not scorch us out?"

His radio brought him an unpleasant metallic quaver—the Martian's sardonic imitation of a Terrestrial laugh. Then: "The ansswer iss sso obviouss. You have sstrrange thingss today, with sseemingly helplesss frreighterrss. We want to obsserrve the sshipss you have left."

So that was it. And if the Martians knew the setup they'd guess the reason—hurry to head off the real convoy—

"If I don't surrender, you won't get them," reminded Kilrain.

"And you will die," came the re-

sponse. "If you do you will live—well trreated—light captivity—"

LIGHT captivity! The Martian commander meant that. Martians kept their words, whatever else they failed at. Captivity—life—instead of the death to which his government had sent him. Perhaps, later, an exchange. His record dry-cleaned. All those things Kilrain thought, until:

"You're soft, skipper." It was Johnston, beside him. "You're going to knuckle under to that Martian squid. Tell him to go tackle a comet. He can kill us but we'll make him know it's tough."

Immediately Kilrain knew that he had never taken seriously that offer of mercy from the enemy. "I'm as hard as you are Johnston. Fumble among those wrecked remote controls. Get the two wires that connect to the last freighter's bomb-load. Be ready—"

"Hold!" cut in the Martian. "I hearr you. I have explossion contrrols of my own—they'rre sset. If I sshoot orr rray, all my sshipss will sshoot orr rray. If you don't orderr yourr man to sstand eassy—"

Kilrain understood at once, and understood something else.

The Martian ships were set on one trigger. Every weapon, every magazine, was radio-geared to the flagship. As one they would shoot, ray, or—explode.

Yes, of course. Fire a gun, all guns fired. Flash a ray, all rays flashed. But if all the munitions aboard the flagship exploded, in one instant, the radio impulse would be transferred throughout—

"Give me a signal beam," said Kilrain to his enemy. "I'm coming to you, bringing my freighter along."

"Sir!" Johnston almost wailed.

"Stand where you are, Johnston," snapped Kilrain. "No, don't budge a finger. Hear me? *Not a finger.*"

Johnston's head dipped inside his glassite helmet, looking at his fingers. They were clenched, each hand holding a terminal wire. He met his commander's gaze, and winked understanding.

"Very good, sir," he said.

"That iss wisse," the listening Martian told them. "Now, the guide-beam."

It came through, a buzz and a point of light on the vision screen. Kilrain made semi-speed along that little path through space. Outside, he knew, the remaining freighter kept pace with him. Its control-ray was no longer adaptable, but served as a tether.

"Come closse, and no trrickss," bade the Martian. "Orr you will be blown to atomss. Sslack sspeed now—sslack, I ssay! We arre going to ssend a boarding parrty—"

KILRAIN was coming alongside the huge idling space-craft, melonlike in comparison to his little cracked walnut of a destroyer. Its bleak, forbidding oval faded from his vision screen, and there appeared instead a grotesque head and shoulders—head like a seeding chrysanthemum, shoulders slack and robe-covered, with a gold-worked collar of office. The Martian space-admiral was dialing him in, could see him as well.

"Sstand eassy," commanded the chrysanthemum head, its face-petals stirring windily around the spot where the artificial voice-box would be. "We arre going to come aboarrd you—"

Kilrain visualized within his imagination, better now than his lighted vision screen, the situation—his freighter sped alongside, close and steady. If he changed course, *so*—

"Yank!" he yelled, and flung up his hand.

Yank Johnston laid the naked terminals across each other, a long jagged blue spark bloomed at the juncture. Then Kilrain knew the heavens to fill with white glare, and all solid things to pass from him. He wondered what the next world was like. Then he was unable to wonder, to think, to feel, to command his senses.

He had no senses.

BUT, AS IF only a moment had passed, the senses came back.

He sniffed. He smelled antiseptic, fresh-ironed linen. One of his eyes opened, the other was held shut by bandages. He lay on a cot in a white room, with a uniformed doctor on one side, a resplendant staff officer on the other.

"I know this isn't heaven," said Kilrain. "It's a hospital. Don't tell me that I'm on Ganymede or Io or Europa."

"No, Captain," smiled the staff officer. His smile was fat, like his body. "You are on Earth. St. Louis."

"All the way back home? How—"

"After the smashing of the Martian fleet—very mysterious, that—a scout from the second convoy picked you up and one other man—still in space-overalls, floating unconscious in space among the wreckage. You were taken aboard a hospital ship. You were too badly injured, too far gone, to be shifted to a colonial hospital. And so you made the round trip home, in an unconscious state. You're going to be well now. The doctor says so."

"I say so, but don't ask me why," added the doctor, eyeing Kilrain as though he were some form of animal life.

KILRAIN drew a deep breath. "You spoke of one other survivor. Was that Johnston? Yank Johnston? Is he—" He could not finish the question, but the doctor knew what he meant.

"Johnston came to himself just about three hours ahead of you. His first words were to promise that he'd kill me if you didn't recover too. 'Skipper and I are too mean to be killed,' he said. 'We've got lots more loose fighting to do.'"

"Yank's right," said Kilrain gravely. "Too mean to be killed . . . . do I still have all my arms and legs and so on?"

"You'll be fit for active duty within three weeks," promised the doctor, and the staff officer giggled.

"Johnston has already applied for more convoy duty," he said. "As for you, we've arranged so many things—a staff appointment, very pleasant, even luxurious—"

"Oh," interrupted Kilrain. "Very pleasant, even luxurious. No thanks. I speak with Yank. Convoy duty. Put us both on the same ship. How soon will there be another lashing of freighters to be snaked through the blockade?"

"Oh, many such, Captain Kilrain. But you—after what you've gone through—"

"After what I've gone through, anything else will be soft." Kilrain yawned sleepily. "Anyway, I think I've put an armor-plating on my luck. I was sent out to die for my government. Instead, I made a whole fleetful of Martians die for theirs. That wasn't expected, was it?"

The fat staff officer drew in his lips, trying to look very disdainful. "After all, Captain, you did have the best light battle craft—considered one hundred percent effective for its duty."

"Its duty was to carry five condemned men to death," reminded Kilrain. "Well, it qualified on only three. Yank and I came out alive. Not such a good ship after all. Only sixty per-

cent effective.

"Don't be bitter," urged the doctor. "Bad for your liver."

"Work will clear my liver complaint up. I ought to have an even chance to pull the trick a second time. After that, a better than even chance. Each trip will make Johnston and me tougher to kill, surer to come through."

The staff officer's eyes goggled like a frog's.

"You mean that, Captain! I can see that you mean it."

"To be sure I mean it. I get the job, eh?"

"I will see to it myself, in person. And, since it comes to plain words, I think that your choice is the most glorious, the most noble, the most heroic—"

"Since it comes to plain words," said Kilrain wearily, "it doesn't make a bit of difference what you think."

He closed his one good eye and went to sleep.

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MEN of the

The thipdar wheeled in the air and made for the balloon with a rush

WHEN the last of the sabertooth men had been killed or had fled, David, Hodon, and O-aa joined Ghak and his warriors. Immediately, Hodon espied the little old man and advanced upon him.

"I kill," said Hodon.

The little old man screamed and hid behind Ghak. "You promised that you would not let Hodon kill me," he whimpered, "if I guided you here."

"I shall keep my promise," said Ghak. "Leave the man alone, Hodon! What has he done that you should want to kill him?"

"He tried to kill O-aa; so that he could eat her," replied Hodon.

"I was not going to keep her all for myself," whined the old man; "I was going to share her with Hodon and David."

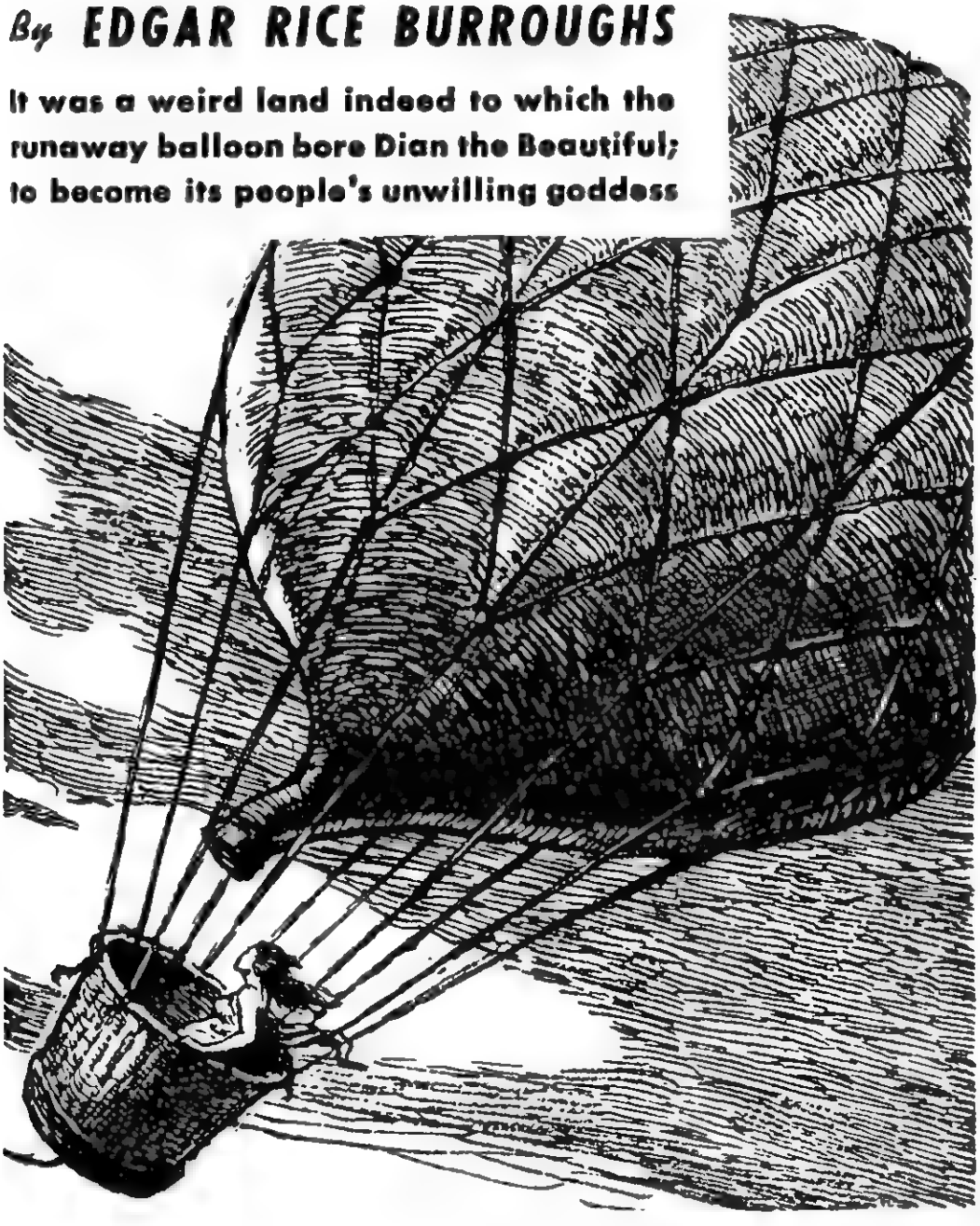
"Who is this old man," demanded Ghak, "who says that his name is *not* Dolly Dorcas?"

"He was a prisoner of the sabertooth men," said David. "I think he is a

BRONZE AGE

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

It was a weird land indeed to which the runaway balloon bore Dian the Beautiful; to become its people's unwilling goddess



little crazy."

"He led me here," said Ghak; "so you have him to thank for your rescue. Do not harm him. What does he mean by saying that his name is not Dolly Dorcas?"

"He told us," explained David, "that he was wrecked on a ship named The Dolly Dorcas near the North Pole of the outer world from which I come; then, in a small boat, he drifted through the North Polar Opening into Pellucidar. O-aa got things a little mixed and thought his name was Dolly Dorcas."

"He ate all the men that were in the boat with him," said O-aa; "and he said that when they were all gone, he was about to cut off one of his own legs and eat that, when he found food. He is a very hungry man."

"I do not see how he could eat anybody," said Ghak; "he has no teeth."

"You'd be surprised," said the little old man.

"Well, you— What is your name, anyway, if it isn't Dolly Dorcas?" demanded Ghak.

"I don't remember," said the old man.

"Well, then, we shall just call you Ah-gilak; and that will be your name." (Ah-gilak means, in Pellucidarian, old man.)

"Well," said the little old man, "at least Ah-gilak is a better name for a man than Dolly Dorcas."

"And remember this, Ah-gilak," continued Ghak, "if you ever try to eat anybody again, I'll let Hodon kill you."

"Some of them were very good eating," sighed Ah-gilak, reminiscently; especially that Swede."

"Let us go to the village of Kali now," said David. "O-aa, Hodon, and I must have food. We nearly starved to death in that cave. Then I shall send a runner north to the caves where Oose and the remnants of his people are hiding, after which we will go down to the Lural Az, where your ships lie, Ghak, and embark for home; if you feel that you have taught the Suvians their lesson sufficiently well."

Between the canyon and the village of Kali, they saw a party of men coming from the north. At sight of so many armed warriors, these people turned to flee; but O-aa called to them, "Come back! It is all right; these are our friends;" then she said to Ghak, "those are my people; I recognized my father, the king of Kali."

WHEN the newcomers approached more closely, Hodon saw that Blug was with Oose; and he went and put his arm around O-aa. When Blug saw that, he ran forward.

"I told you that if you were around here when I came back, I'd kill you," he shouted.

"Go away!" said O-aa. "Hodon is my mate."

"What is that?" demanded Oose, her father. "I told you you were to mate with Blug, and I meant it; Blug shall have you."

"I kill!" shouted Blug, as he bore down on Hodon.

The Sarian met him with a clean right to the chin, and Blug dropped in his tracks. The Sarian warriors yelled in delight; but Blug was up in an instant, and this time he managed to clinch. The two men fell to the ground, fighting like a couple of wild cats. It was not a pretty fight, as the Marquis of Queensberry was entirely unknown to these men of the Stone Age. They gouged and bit and scratched, as Blug tried to fasten his teeth in Hodon's jugular.

They were both covered with blood, and one of Blug's eyes was hanging out on his cheek, when Hodon espied a

rock lying near at hand. He happened to be on top for the moment; and, seizing the rock, he raised it high and brought it down with all his strength full on Blug's face.

Blug had never been beautiful; but without any features to speak of left, and those scrambled, he was something of a sight. Hodon raised the rock and struck again; the third time, Blug relaxed and lay still; but Hodon did not stop striking him until his whole head was a jelly; then he stood up.

He looked at Oose. "O-aa is my mate," he said.

Oose looked down at Blug. "Blug is not much good any more," he said. "If O-aa wants you she may have you."

They looked around, then, for O-aa. She had disappeared. "It has always been thus," said Hodon. "Three times I have fought for her, and three times she has run away while I was fighting."

"When you catch her, you should beat her," said Oose.

"I will," said Hodon.

He searched for O-aa for a long time, but he did not find her; then he came to the village of Kali, where his fellow Sarians were eating and resting.

When David Innes had rested sufficiently, the Sarians bid the Kalians farewell and departed for their ships, which lay off the coast forty miles away.

Hodon went with them. He was very sad, for he thought that O-aa had run away from him because she did not really wish to be his mate.

And O-aa? When she had seen Blug get his arms around Hodon, and the two men had fallen to the ground, she had known that Hodon would be killed; so she had run away, rather than remain and mate with Blug. She started south, intending to find Sari, which lay eight hundred miles away. She knew that she had a long journey before her and that the chances were quite remote that she would survive all the innumerable dangers of the way; but, with Hodon dead, she did not care much.

SHE was a cave girl, and death was such a familiar occurrence in her life that she did not fear it particularly. Early man must have been a fatalist; otherwise he would have gone crazy from fear. O-aa was a fatalist. She said to herself, "If the tarag, or the thipdar, or Ta-ho happened to meet me at just the right time and place, I shall be killed. Whatever they and I are doing now must lead up to that moment when we meet or do not meet; nothing can change it." That is the way she felt; so she did not worry—but she kept her eyes and her ears open, just the same.

O-aa had never been to Sari, but she knew that it lay inland from the Lural Az and that between Kali and Sari there were a few tribes which belonged to the Federation and would be friendly to her. She would follow along the shore of the Lural Az until she found one of these tribes, and then she could get better directions for the remainder of her journey.

She knew that David Innes and the other Sarians would soon be going down to the sea and their ships, but she wanted to avoid them for fear that they would send her back to her father and Blug; so she went quite a distance south before she turned toward the east and the Lural Az, that great body of uncharted water, teeming with giant saurians, such as ruled the Cretaceous seas in the Mesozoic period of the outer crust. O-aa was a hill girl and was afraid of the great sea, but no less terrible were the dangers that threatened her on land.

And as O-aa came down to the sea of which she was so afraid, eyes watched her from the concealment of bushes that

she was approaching.

ABNER PERRY was a broken man; he could neither eat nor sleep, for he knew that it was his own culpable carelessness that had tossed Dian the Beautiful to the mercy of the winds on high. He had dispatched three runners to try to follow the course of the drifting balloon; but he held to little hope that, should they find it when it came to earth, they would find Dian alive: cold, hunger, and thirst would long since have taken their grim toll of her strength. For the first time in his life, Abner Perry seriously considered taking his own life.

Dian the Beautiful had been mildly surprised by the sudden upward rush of the balloon, but she had not guessed what it portended until she looked down over the edge of the basket and saw the end of the rope which had secured the balloon to the windlass dangling high above the village of Sari.

Dian the Beautiful is a cave girl of the Stone Age. She knew nothing about balloons other than what she had gathered from Abner Perry while he was building this one. Only in a vague way did she know what made it go up in the air. She knew nothing about ripcords, and so she did not realize that once again Perry had blundered; he had neglected to equip the balloon with this safety device.

Had she known more about balloonery, she would have known that she might have climbed the suspension lines to the net and cut a hole in the gas bag with her dagger, letting the gas escape. But Dian the Beautiful did not know this; and so she watched her friends shrink to tiny dots far below; and eventually, with the village of Sari, disappear in the distance.

Dian knew that the Sun was a ball of fire; and so she was surprised to discover that the closer she got to the sun, the colder she became. It didn't make sense, and it upset a theory that was as old as the human race in Pellucidar. But then the balloon upset some long-standing theories, too. She knew that the basket and the peritonea of dinosaurs, of which the gas bag was fabricated, were far too heavy to sail up into the air. Why they should do so was beyond her; so she decided that it was because Perry could do anything.

The prevailing winds of Pellucidar blow, generally, from the north to south for half the outer-Earthly year and from south to north the other half, depending upon whether it is winter at one Pole or the other. The wind that carried Dian away from Sari was blowing in a southwesterly direction and bearing her toward Thuria, The Land of Awful Shadow.

Beneath the eternal noonday sun, the surface temperature of Pellucidar is usually high, requiring of her inhabitants a minimum of clothing; so Dian's costume was scanty to a degree. A bit of skin, caught with a rawhide thong across one shoulder, hung gracefully and becomingly in a long point to below her knees in one place, leaving one well-shaped leg entirely bare almost to her waist. It had been designed with as much subtlety as the finest creation of a French couturier, to accentuate and reveal, to hide and intrigue; but it had not been designed for great altitudes. Dian was cold.

Dian was hungry and thirsty, too; but there were neither food nor drink in this new world into which she had soared; so she did what Pellucidarians usually do when they are hungry and cannot obtain food—she lay down and slept. This conserves energy and prolongs life; it also gives one some respite from the gnawing of hunger and the pangs of thirst.

DIAN did not know how long she slept, but when she awoke she was over The Land of Awful Shadow. She was in shadow herself, and now it was very cold. Above her was the Dead World, as the Pellucidarians call it, that tiny satellite of Pellucidar's sun that, revolving coincidentally with the rotation of the Earth, remained constantly in a fixed position above that part of the inner world known as The Land of Awful Shadow. Below her was Thoria, which lies partially within the shadow, and, to her right, the Lidi Plains where the Thorians graze and train their gigantic saddle animals, the huge diplodocuses of the Upper Jurassic, which they call lidi.

The greater cold had awakened Dian, and now she was suffering from that and from hunger and from thirst. Hope had left her, for she knew that she must soon die; and she thought that her dead body would continue to float around above Pellucidar forever.

When the balloon emerged again into sunlight, Dian lay down and slept; and, from exhaustion, she must have slept a long time, for when she awoke she was above the nameless strait that extends for a thousand miles or more and connects the Sojar Az with the Korsar Az. She knew what it was, for it bounds the southwestern portion of the continent on which Sari lies—beyond it was the terra incognita of her people, and no man knew what lay in that land of mystery.

The strait is about two hundred miles wide at the point at which Dian was crossing it; and the land, curving gently upward around her, gave her such a range of vision that she could see the opposite shore.

Even in her hopelessness she could not but be impressed by the fact that she was looking upon a new world, the first of all her people to set eyes upon it. It gave her a little thrill, in which, possibly, was something of terror.

Her absorption was broken in upon by a hissing sound that came from above and behind her. Turning and looking up, she saw that terror of the Pellucidarian skies—a giant thipdar circling above the gas bag. The body of this huge pterodactyl measures some forty feet in length, while its bat-like wings have a spread of fully thirty feet. Its mighty jaws are armed with long, sharp teeth and its claws are equipped with horrible talons.

As a rule it attacks anything in sight. If it attacked the gas bag and ripped it open, Dian would be plummeted into the water below. She was helpless; she could only watch the terrible creature circling about the balloon and listen to its angry hisses.

The gas bag had the thipdar baffled. It paid no attention to him, but floated on serenely; it neither tried to escape nor give battle. What was the thing, anyway? He wondered if it were good to eat; and to find out, he gave it a tentative nip. Instantly some foul smelling stuff blew into his nostrils. He hissed angrily, and flew off a short distance; then he wheeled and came screaming toward the gas bag again.

Dian tried to think only of David, as one might concentrate on prayer who knew the end was near.

O-AA, always alert to danger, nevertheless was not aware of the man hiding in the bushes. He was a large man with broad shoulders, a deep chest, and mighty forearms and biceps. He wore a loin cloth made of the feathers of birds—yellow feathers with two transverse bars of red feathers. It was artistic and striking. He had rings in his ears; they were made of fish bone. A few strands of his hair were braided and made into a small knot at the top

of the back of his head; into this knot were stuck three long, yellow feathers barred with red. He carried a stone knife and a spear tipped with the tooth of a huge shark. His features were strong and regular; he was a handsome man, and he was sun-tanned to a golden bronze.

As O-aa came opposite him, he leaped from his concealment and seized her by the hair; then he started to drag her through the bushes down toward the beach. He soon found that that was not so easy as he had hoped. Dragging O-aa was like dragging a cat with hydrophobia; O-aa didn't drag worth a cent. She pulled back; she bit; she scratched; she kicked; and when she wasn't biting, she was emitting a stream vitriolic vituperation that would have done credit to Pegler when on the subject of Mr. Brown.

Cave people of the Stone Age are of few words and short tempers; the prehistoric Adonis who was dragging O-aa along by the hair was no exception that proved the rule; he was wholly orthodox. After a couple of bites, he raised his spear and clunked O-aa on the head with the haft of it; and O-aa took the full count. Then he swung her across one shoulder and trotted down to the beach, where a canoe was drawn up on the sand. He dumped O-aa into it and then pulled it out into the water.

He held it against the incoming rollers; and at precisely the psychological moment, he leaped in and paddled strongly. The light craft rose on the next roller, dove into the trough beyond, and O-aa was launched upon the great sea she so greatly feared.

When she recovered consciousness her heart sank. The canoe was leaping about boisterously, and land was already far away. The man sat upon the deck of the tapering stern and paddled with a very broad, flat paddle. O-aa appraised him furtively. She noted and appreciated his pulchritude at the same time that she was seeking to formulate a plan for killing him.

She also examined the canoe. It was about twenty feet long, with a three foot beam; it was decked over fore and aft for about six feet, leaving an eight foot cockpit; transverse booms were lashed across it at each end of the cockpit, protruding outboard about four feet on either side; lashed to the underside of the ends of these booms was a twenty foot length of bamboo, about six inches in diameter, running parallel with the craft on each side, the whole constituting a double outrigger canoe. It was a clumsy craft to handle, but it was uncapsizable; even O-aa, who knew nothing about boats or seas, could see that; and she felt reassured. She would have been even more reassured had she known that the compartments beneath the two decks were watertight and that in addition to this, they held fresh water in bamboo containers and a quantity of food.

THE man saw that she had regained consciousness. "What is your name?" he asked.

"My name is O-aa," she snapped; "I am the daughter of a king. When my mate, my father, and my seven brothers learn of this, they will come and kill you."

The man laughed. "My name is La-ak," he said. "I live on the Island of Canda. I have six wives; you will be the seventh. With seven wives I shall be a very important man; our chief has only seven. I came to the mainland to get another wife; I did not have to look long, did I?" Again he laughed.

"I will not mate with you," O-aa snapped.

Once again La-ak laughed. "You will be glad to," he said, "after my other

six wives teach you how to behave—that is, you will if you live through it; they will not stand for any foolishness. They have already killed two women whom I brought home, who refused to become my wives. In my country no man may take a mate without her consent. I think it is a very foolish custom; but it is an old one, and we have to abide by it."

"You had better take me back to the mainland," said O-aa, "for I will not mate with you; and I shall certainly kill some of your wives before they kill me; then you will be worse off than you are now."

He looked at her for a long time before he spoke again. "I believe you," he said; "but you are very beautiful, and I do not intend to be cheated of you entirely. What happens in this canoe, no one in Canda will ever know, for I'll throw you overboard before we get there;" then he laid down his paddle and came toward her.

DAVID INNES, HODON, and the little old man, Ah-gilak, boarded the ship of Ghak the Hairy One; and when all of the other warriors had boarded this and the other ships, the fleet set sail.

Ah-gilak looked around him with a critical and contemptuous eye. "Dod-burn it!" he ejaculated. "What dod-burned landlubber built this tub? There ain't a gold-durned thing right about her. I reckon as how she'd sail sidewise just as well as she would ahead; *an'* a lateen sail!" he added, disgustedly. "Now, you should have saw The Dolly Dorcus; there was a sweet ship."

Ghak the Hairy One glared at him with a dangerous gleam in his eye, for Ghak was proud of every ship in the Navy of the Empire of Pellucidar. They were the first ships he had ever seen and they carried the first sails; to him they were the last word in perfection and modernity. Abner Perry had designed them; did this little, toothless runt think he could do better than Abner Perry? With a great, hairy hand Ghak seized Ah-gilak by the beard.

"Wait!" cautioned David. "I think Ah-gilak knows what he is talking about. He sailed ships on the outer Earth. Perry never did. Perry did the best he could down here, with no knowledge of ship design and no one to help him who had ever seen a ship before. He would be the first to welcome some one who could help us build a better navy. I think we can use Ah-gilak after we get home."

Ghak reluctantly released Ah-gilak's beard. "He talks too much," he said; and, turning, walked away.

"If I hadn't been wrecked in the Arctic and washed down into this dod-burned world," said Ah-gilak, "I would probably have commanded the fastest clipper ship in the world to-day. I was aimin' for to build it just as soon as I got back to Cape Cod."

"Clipper ship!" said David. "There aren't any more clipper ships. I don't suppose there's been one built in more than fifty years."

"Why, dod-burn you," exclaimed Ah-gilak; "they hadn't been building 'em more'n five year when The Dolly Dorcas went down—let's see; that was 1845."

David Innes looked at him in amazement. "Are you sure of that date?" he demanded.

"Sure as I am that I'm standin' here, as the feller said," replied Ah-gilak.

"How old were you when The Dolly Dorcas was lost?" asked David.

"I was forty years old. I can always remember, because my birthday was the same as President Tyler's. He would have been fifty-five on March 29th, 1845, if he lived; an' I was just

fifteen years younger than him. They was talkin' about a feller named Polk runnin' for President when we sailed."

"Do you know how old you are now?" asked David.

"Well, I sort o' lost track o' time down here in this dod-burned world; but I reckon I must be close to sixty."

"Not very close," said David; "you're a hundred and thirty-five."

"Well, of all the dod-burned liars, you sure take the cake! A hundred an' thirty-five! God an' Gabriel! Do I look a hundred an' thirty-five?"

"No," said David; "I'd say that you don't look a day over a hundred and thirty."

The old man looked at David disgustedly. "I ain't mentionin' no names," he said; "but some folks ain't got no more sense than a white pine dog with a poplar tail, as the feller said;" then he turned and walked away.

HODON had been listening to the conversation; but he knew nothing about years or ages, and he wondered what it all meant. Anyway, he would not have been much interested, had he; for he was thinking of O-aa, and wondering where she was. He was sorry now that he had not stayed on shore and searched for her.

The flag ship of the little fleet of three ships was called Amoz in honor of Dian the Beautiful, who came from the land of Amoz. It was crowded with five hundred warriors. It had eight guns, four on a side, on a lower deck. There were solid shot, chain shot, and shells for each of the guns, all of which were muzzle loading. They had to be run back on crude wooden tracks to load, and then run forward again, with their muzzles sticking out of port holes, to fire; they were the pride of the Navy.

The sailors who manned the Amoz and the other ships were copper colored Mezops from the Anoroc Islands; and the Admiral of the Fleet was Ja, King of Anoroc. The lateen sail of the Amoz was enormous; it required the combined strength of fifty husky Mezops to raise it. Like the gas bag of Perry's balloon and the fabric of his late aeroplane, it was made of the peritonea of dinosaurs. This was one of Perry's prime discoveries, for there were lots of dinosaurs and their peritonea were large and tough. Habitually, they objected to giving them up; so it was quite an exciting job collecting peritonea, for dinosaurs such as carry A-1 peritonea are large, ferocious, and ill mannered.

The fleet had been under way for but a short time, when Ah-gilak, casting a weather eye about from long habit, discovered a cloud astern. "We're a-goin' to have a blow," he said to Ja, and pointed.

Ja looked and nodded. "Yes," he said, and gave orders to shorten sail.

The cloud was not very large when it was first discovered, but it was undeniably a wind cloud. As it came closer, it grew in extent; and it became black. Ragged shreds of it whipped ahead. Around the ship was a sudden, deadly calm.

"We're a-goin' to have more 'n a blow," said Ah-gilak. "We're a-goin' to have more 'n a gale. That there looks like a dod-burned hurricane."

Now there was a sudden gust of wind that made the sagging sail flap angrily. Ja had ordered it close reefed; and the Mezops were battling with the whipping peritonea, as the wind increased in violence.

And now the storm was upon them. Rolling black clouds shut out the eternal sun, lightning flashed, and thunder roared; rain began to fall—not in drops or sheets, but in solid masses. The wind wailed and shrieked like some ferocious demon of destruction. Men

clung to the ship's rails, to one another, to anything that they could lay hands on to keep from being blown overboard.

David Innes went among them, ordering them below; at last only the Mezop sailors and a few Sarians remained on the upper deck—they and the little old man, Ah-gilak. Innes and Ghak and Hodon clustered behind Ja and Ah-gilak. The little old man was in his element.

"I bin wrecked seven times," he shrieked above the storm, "an' I can be wrecked again, as the feller said; an' dod-burn it if I don't think I'm goin' to be."

The sea had risen, and the waves were growing constantly in immensity. The clumsy, overloaded ship wallowed out of one great sea only to be half swallowed by another.

So dark was it and so thick the rain that neither of the other ships could be seen. David was fearful for the safety of the little Sari; in act, he was fearful for the fate of all three of the ships if the storm did not abate soon or if it increased in violence. As though possessed of sardonic humor, the hurricane raged even more violently while the thought was yet in David's mind.

THE Amoz rose upon the crest of a watery mountain to plunge into a watery abyss. The men clung to whatever they could as the ship buried its nose deep in the sea; and a huge, following wave combed over the stern, submerging them.

David thought it was the end. He knew that the ship would never rise again from beneath those tons of raging water, yet still he clung to the thing he had seized. Slowly, ponderously, like some gigantic beast trying to drag itself from a quick sand, the Amoz staggered up, shaking the water from its deck.

"Dod-burn me!" screamed Ah-gilak; "but this *is* a sweet ship. It didn't take half that sea to swamp The Dolly Dorcas, and' I thought she was a sweet ship. Well, live and learn, as the feller said."

There were not as many men on the deck as there has been. David wondered how many of the poor devils had been lost. He looked at those about him; Ghak, and, Ja, and Hodon, and Ah-gilak were all there.

David looked up at the waves as they towered above the ship, and he looked down into the abysses as the ship started down from the crest. "Seventy feet," he said, half to himself; "a good seventy feet."

Suddenly Ah-gilak yelled, "Make fast there an' say your prayers!"

David glanced astern. The most stupendous wave he had ever seen trembled above them—hundreds of tons of water poised to crush the ship; then it came!

DIAN the Beautiful awaited the end with supreme indifference; she had reached the limit of human endurance; but she was not afraid. In fact, she was just a little fascinated by the situation, and wondered whether the screaming thipdar winging toward her was coming for her or the gas bag —not that it would make much difference to her in the end.

Suddenly the giant pterodactyl veered to one side, and rushed past. Dian watched it as it soared away, waiting for it to turn and renew the attack; but it did not return. It had finally discovered something of which it was afraid.

Dian looked down over the edge of the basket. She could see the land beyond the strait quite plainly now; she seemed to be much lower, and wondered. She did not know that the gas

was leaking from the balloon where the thipdar had nipped it.

It was some time before she realized the truth—that the balloon was actually descending; and now she had something more to worry about: would it reach the shore, or would it come down in the water? If the latter, she would make food for some saurian; or for a horde of them that would tear her to pieces.

And on the land a short distance back from the shore she saw an amazing sight for Pellucidar—a city, a walled city. She would not have known what it was had David not told her of the cities of his world. Well, she might be about as well off among the saurians as among strange human beings. There was little choice, but upon reflection she hoped that the balloon reached the land before it came down.

It was quite low now, and the land was still a good half mile away. She tried to guage the relation between its drop and its horizontal progress toward the land. She looked down over the edge of the basket and saw that the rope was already dragging in the water. The rope was five hundred feet long. After a part of the rope was submerged the balloon didn't seem to drop any more; but its progress toward land was also retarded, as it dragged the submerged rope through the water. However, it appeared now that it would reach the land first.

Dian was congratulating herself on this as she peered down into the strait when she saw the head of a creature which she knew as an aztarag,* or tiger of the sea, break the water near the trailing rope.

She was congratulating herself upon the fact that she was not down there, when the creature seized the rope in its mighty jaws and started for the center of the strait.

This was too much! Tired, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, though no longer cold, Dian almost broke down. With an effort she kept back the tears for now there was no hope.

But was there none! If she could cut the rope, the balloon would be freed; and would continue on toward shore. Relieved of the weight of five hundred feet of heavy rope, it would certainly drift far inland before it came down. But she couldn't reach the rope; it was fastened to the underneath side of the basket.

There must be some way! She drew her stone knife and commenced to hack at the wickerwork of the basket's floor. At last she had a hole large enough to get her arm through. Feeling around, she found the large rope. It was attached to the basket by many smaller ropes which ran to the periphery of the basket's bottom.

Dian commenced to saw on these smaller ropes. She could see through the hole in the bottom of the basket, and she saw that the balloon was being rapidly dragged toward the water—the aztarag had sounded and was pulling the balloon down behind it!

The girl worked frantically, for once the basket was submerged she would be lost—the sea beneath her was alive with hungry creatures. She saw a gigantic shark just below her; it thrust its snout out of water; and she could almost touch it, as the last rope parted.

Instantly the balloon leaped into the air, and once more started its precarious and seemingly endless journey toward the mysterious world beyond the nameless strait.

* The aztarag is a mighty creature some forty feet in length which was one of the rulers of the Cretaceous seas of the outer crust when the world was in diapers. Remains of it are found in Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas; and paleontologists call him Tylosaurus; but to Dian he was just an aztarag, and nothing to play Post Office with.—Ed.

AS O-AA saw La-ak coming toward her she stood up. "Go back to your paddle," she said, "or I will jump overboard."

La-ak hesitated; for he guessed, rightly, that the girl meant what she said; furthermore, he knew that eventually she must sleep; then he could overpower her. "You are a fool," he said, as he resumed his paddle; "one lives but once."

"O-aa lives in her own way," retorted the girl.

Set sat facing the stern; so that she might watch La-ak. She saw his spear lying beside him; she saw the dagger at his hip. These were instruments of escape, but she could not get them. She glanced around over the great sea that she so feared. Very, very dimly, through the haze of distance, she thought that she could see the mainland; elsewhere there was no sign of land—just the vast expanse of blue water rolling gradually upward in the distance to merge with the blue sky that arched over them and down again to merge with the blue water again on the opposite side. To her left she saw a little cloud, far away. It meant nothing to O-aa, who was a hill girl and consequently less cloud conscious than those who live much upon the sea.

Astern, she saw something else—a long, slender neck toppled by a hideous head with great, fanged jaws. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of a sleek, seal-like body rising momentarily above the slow ground swells. She knew this thing as a ta-ho-az, or a sea lion. It was not the harmless, playful creature that sports in the waters of our own Pacific Ocean; but a terrible engine of destruction whose ravenous appetite is never satisfied.

The fearsome creature was gliding smoothly through the water toward the canoe. That long neck would arch over the gunwale and snatch either La-ak or herself; probably both;or the creature would place a giant flipper on the craft and capsize or swamp it. O-aa thought quickly. She wished to be saved from La-ak, but not at the risk of her own life, if that uncomfortable circumstance could be avoided.

She stood up and pointed, taking a couple of steps toward La-ak as she did so. "Look!" she cried.

La-ak turned to look behind him, and as he did so O-aa sprang forward and seized his spear; then she thrust it with all her strength into the body of La-ak beneath his left shoulder.

With a scream of agony and rage, La-ak tried to turn upon her; but O-aa held to the end of the spear's haft; and when La-ak turned, the sharp shark's tooth with which the spear was tipped, tore into his heart. Thus died La-ak of the Island of Canda.

O-aa looked back at the ta-ho-az. It was approaching, but leisurely; as though it was quite sure that its quarry could not escape, and consequently saw no occasion for haste.

O-aa looked at the pretty yellow and red feather loin cloth on the body of La-ak and at the feathers in his hair. These she had admired greatly; so she removed them, after jerking the spear from the dead man; and then she rolled the naked body of La-ak over the stern of the canoe, after which she picked up the paddle; and with strong, if clumsy, strokes sent the craft ahead.

She glanced back often to see what the ta-ho-az was doing; and at last, to her relief, she saw that it was doing what she had hoped it would do—it had stopped to devour the body of La-ak. This, she guessed, would occupy it for some time; since, though its jaws were enormous, its neck was slender; and it must necessarily nibble rather than gulp.

O-AA had never handled a paddle before, which is not strange, since never before had she been in a boat of any description; but she had watched La-ak; and now she did remarkably well, considering her ignorance and the clumsiness of the craft.

She was hungry, thirsty, and sleepy, and, as now she had lost sight of all land and had no idea in which direction to paddle, she decided that it would be foolish to paddle at all; since, there being so many different directions, and the nearest land being in one direction only, the chances were all in favor of her paddling in a wrong direction. It would be much pleasanter just to drift with the wind.

Of course she was endowed with that homing instinct that is the common heritage of all Pellucidarians to compensate them for lack of heavenly bodies to guide them, but out here on this vast expanse of water in an environment so totally unfamiliar, for the first time in her life she did not trust it.

The little cloud that she had seen had grown to a big cloud, and was coming nearer. O-aa looked at it and thought that it was going to rain, for which she would be thankful; since it would give her water to drink; then she turned her attention to other things.

She had noticed that there was one plank in the after deck where La-ak had sat that didn't seem to fit as well as the others; and thought it was a trivial thing, she had wondered at it. It had suggested something to her—that no one would come out upon this great ocean without food or water. Now she investigated; for O-aa, as you may have gathered, was no fool; and she found that the board, skillfully grooved on both edges, pulled out, revealing a large compartment beneath. In this compartment were extra weapons, fishhooks, lines, nets, bamboo water containers, and smoked meats and dried fruits and vegetables.

O-aa ate and drank her fill; then she lay down to sleep, while the great, black cloud billowed toward her, and the lightning flashed and the thunder boomed. O-aa slept the dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion plus a full and contented stomach.

DAVID was sure that the Amoz was doomed, as he saw the giant wave curling above her stern; then it broke over them, crushing them to the deck, tearing at them to break their holds on the supports to which they clung, driving the prow of the ship deep into the sea.

Not a man there but knew she could never recover from this blow; but she did. Rolling and wallowing she slowly emerged; and as the water sluiced from her deck, David saw the little old man going with it toward the bow, and he lunged after him.

The mast had gone, leaving only a stump, around which was tangled cordage and a section of the sail, that had fouled and ripped away. Just as he reached this, David caught the little old man by one ankle; then, as he himself was being washed toward the stem, he managed to seize hold of the cordage and retain his hold until the last of the water had gone over the side.

He thought that a man one hundred and thirty-five years old could never recover from such a shock; and he was about to pick him up and carry him back, when Ah-gilak scrambled to his feet.

"Dod-burn it!" ejaculated the old man, "I durn near got my feet wet that time, as the feller said."

David smiled. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Never felt so fit in my life," replied Ah-gilak. "Say, you come after me,

didn't you? Why, you dod-burned fool, you might have been washed overboard." That was all he ever said about it.

That last wave marked the height of the storm. The wind continued to blow a gale, but the hurricane was past. The sea still ran high, but was diminishing. After what the Amoz had withstood, she seemed safe enough now. With no headway, she wallowed in the trough of the sea; often standing on her beam ends, but always righting herself.

"I'd take a dod-burned act of Congress to upset this tub," said Ah-gilak. "You can't sail her, an' you can't steer her; but, by gum, you can't wreck her; an' if I'd a-had her instead o' The Dolly Dorcas I wouldn't be down here now in this dod-burned hole-in-the-ground, but back in Cape Cod, probably votin' for John Tyler again, or some other good Democrat."

DAVID went below, at the risk of life and limb, to see how the men there had fared. With the coming of the storm, they had closed all ports, and fastened the guns down more securely. Fortunately, none of them had broken loose; and there were only a few minor casualties among the men, from being thrown about during the wild pitching of the ship.

The Mezop sailors above had not fared so well; all but twenty-five of them had been washed overboard. All the boats were gone, the mast was gone, and most of the sail. The Amoz was pretty much of a derelict. Neither of the other ships was in sight; and David had given them both up for lost, especially the little Sari.

Their situation looked rather hopeless to these men of the Stone Age. "If the boats hadn't been lost," said Ghak, "some of us could get ashore."

"Why can't we break up the deck and build a raft—several of them?" suggested Hodon. "We could paddle rafts to shore, but we couldn't ever paddle the Amoz."

"You dod-burned landlubbers give me a pain," snorted Ah-gilak. "We got the stub of a mast, part of the sail, and plenty cordage; we can jury rig the gol-durned tub, an' get to shore twice as fast an' ten times as easy as buildin' rafts an' paddin'. Give me some hands, an' I'll have her shipshape in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail, as the feller said. How fer is it to port?"

David shrugged. "That depends on how far the hurricane carried us and in what direction. We may be fifty miles from port, or we may be five hundred. Your guess would be better than mine."

"How's the fresh water?" demanded Ah-gilak.

"We've enough for many sleeps," said Ja.

"Dod-burn it!" cried the old man; "how in tarnation 's a fellow goin' to do any figurin' with a bunch of landlubbers that ain't never knowed what time it was since they was born."

"On the contrary," said David, "they always know what time it is."

"How come?" demanded Ah-gilak.

"It is always noon."

Ah-gilak snorted. He was in no mood for persiflage. "Well," he said, "we'll do the dod-burndest best we can. We may run short of water, but we got plenty food," he cast his eyes on the warriors coming up from the lower deck.

O-AA was awakened by the pitching of the canoe, and opened her eyes to see a wall of water towering above her. She lay in a watery canyon, with another wall of water hemming her in on the other side. This was a harrowing situation that was quite beyond her

experience; nothing could save her; one of the walls would topple over on her. But nothing of the kind happened. Instead, the wall came down; and the canoe was lifted to the summit of one just like it. Here, O-aa could see a tumbling mass of wind torn water as far as the eye could reach. The sky was black with angry, rolling clouds, that were split by vivid flashes of lightning to the accompaniment of peals of earth shaking thunder. The wind howled and shrieked in a fury of malign hate. Then the canoe sank into another canyon.

This went on and on; there seemed to be no end to it. The cockpit was half full of water; but La-ak had built well—the canoe could neither capsize nor sink and it was so light that it rode the crest of even the most mountainous waves; nothing short of a bolt of lightning could destroy it. This, however, O-aa did not know; she thought that each wave would be the last, as far as she was concerned; but as wave after wave lifted her upon its crest and then dropped her into a new abyss that was exactly like the last one, she took courage; until presently she was enjoying the experience. O-aa had never been on a roller coaster; but she was getting just the same sort of trill out of this experience; and it lasted much longer, and she didn't have to buy any tickets.

THE Sari, being a lighter ship than either of the other two, was blown along before the hurricane much faster; also, as it carried a much smaller sail, its mast did not go by the board as quickly as had that of the Amoz. The third ship had lost its mast even before that of the Amoz had gone; so when the wind abated a little, the Sari, while also by this time a dismasted derelict, was far ahead of her sister ships.

Having but a single, open deck, she had lost most of her complement; but she was still staunch of frame and timber—for Perry and David had built her well, much better than the first ship Perry had designed, and for which she was named, which had turned bottom-side up at its launching.

The continuing gale, which persisted after the worst of the hurricane had past, was blowing the Sari merrily along to what fate or what destination no man knew. The survivors were only glad that they were alive; like most men of the Stone Age, they had no questions to ask of the future, the present being their only immediate concern; though, belieing that very assertion, they did catch what rain water they could to augment the supply already aboard.

The deck of the Sari was still a more less precarious resting place, when one of the Mezops sighted something floating dead ahead. He called his companions' attention to it, and several of them worked their way around the rail to have a look at what he had discovered.

Now, anything floating on this lonely sea was worthy of remark; it was not like the waters off the coast of California, where half the deck loads of Oregon lumbermen bob around to menace navigation and give the Coast Guard the jitters.

"It's a canoe," said Ko, the big Mezop who had discovered it.

"Is there anyone in it?" asked Raj, the captain of the Sari and a chief among the Mezops.

"Wait until it comes up again," said Ko.

"It must be a wonderful canoe, to have lived through such a storm," said Raj.

"It had a most peculiar look," said Ko. "Here it comes again! I think I see someone in it."

"It is a strange canoe," said Raj. "There are things sticking out from its

sides."

"I once saw one like it," said another Mezop; "perhaps many thousand sleeps ago. It was blown to our island with a man who said that he came from an island called Canda, far out on the Lural Az. The canoe had bamboo floats on either side of it. It could not capsize. It had watertight compartments; so it could not sink. We killed the man. I think this canoe is from Canda."

Presently the Sari, which presented a larger surface to the wind than the canoe, overhauled it. O-aa was watching it. Having heard about the great ships of the Sarians from Hodon and David, she guessed that this must be one of them; and she was not afraid. Here was rescue, if she could get aboard. She waved to the men looking over the rail at her.

"It is a girl," said Raj. "Get a rope; we will try to get her aboard."

"She is from Canda," said the sailor who had seen the man from Canda, "she wears the same feather loin cloth that the man from Canda wore. We had better let her drown."

"No," said Raj; "she is a girl." Just what were the implications of this statement, you may guess as well as I. Raj was a man of the Stone Age; so, in many respects, he was probably far more decent than men of the civilized outer world; but he was still a man.

One of the outriggers of the canoe bumped against the side of the Sari just as Ko threw a rope to O-aa. The girl seized it as the ship heeled over to starboard and rose on another wave while the canoe dropped into the trough, but O-aa held on. She was jerked from the canoe and banged against the side of the ship; but she clambered up the rope like a monkey —cave girls are that way, probably from climbing inadequate and rickety ladders and poles all their lives.

As she clambered over the side, Raj took her by the arm. "She is not only a girl," he said, "but she is beautiful; I shall keep her for myself."

O-aa slapped him in the face, and jerked away. "I am the daughter of a king," she said. "My mate, my father, and my nine brothers will find you out and kill you if you harm me."

A MAN from Thoria, who was searching for a herd of lidi which had strayed, followed them to the end of the world which is bounded by the nameless strait. There, a shadow passed across him. He looked up, thinking to see a thipdar; but there was a tree close by, and he was not afraid. What he saw filled him with amazement and not a little awe. A great round thing, to the bottom of which something seemed to be attached, was floating high in the air out across the nameless strait. He watched it for a long time, until it was only a speck; then he went on searching for his lost lidi, which he never found.

He thought a great deal about this remarkable experience as he made his way back to Thoria on his giant lidi. What could the thing have been? He was sure that it was not alive, for he had seen no wings nor any movement of any kind; the thing had seemed just to drift along on the wind.

Being a Stone Age man living in a savage world, he had had so many exciting adventures that he didn't even bother to mention most of them after he got home; unless he hadn't had any adventures at all and hadn't killed any one or anything, nor hadn't been nearly killed himself; then he told his mate about that, and they both marvelled.

But this thing that he had seen above the nameless strait was different; this was something really worth talking about. No one else in the world had

ever seen anything like that, and the chances were that nobody would believe him when he told about it. He would have to take that chance, but nothing could change the fact that he had seen it.

As soon as he got home, he commenced to talk about it; and, sure enough, no one believed him, his mate least of all. That made him so angry that he beat her.

"You were probably off in that village of Liba with that frowzy, fat, shejalok; and are trying to make me believe that you went all the way to the end of the world," she had said; so perhaps he should have beaten her.

He had been home no great time, perhaps a couple of sleeps, when a runner came from Sari. Everybody gathered around the chief to hear what the runner had to say.

"I have run all the way from Sari," he said, "to ask if any man of Thoria has seen a strange thing floating through the air. It is round—"

"And it has something fastened to the bottom of it," fairly shouted the man whom no one would believe.

"Yes!" cried the runner. "You have seen it?"

"I have seen it," said the man.

His fellow Thorians looked at him in amazement; after all he had told the truth—that was the amazing part of it. His mate assumed an air of importance and an I-told-you-so expression as she looked around at the other women.

"Where did you see it?" demanded the runner.

"I had gone to the end of the world in search of my lost lidi," explained the man, "and I saw this thing floating out across the nameless strait."

"Then she is lost," cried the runner.

"Who is lost?" demanded the chief.

"Dian the Beautiful who was in the basket which hung from the bottom of the great round ball that Perry called a balloon."

"She will never be found," said the chief. "No man knows what lies beyond the nameless strait. Sometimes, when it is very clear, men have thought that they saw land there; that is why it is called a strait; but it may be an ocean bigger than the Sojar Az, which has no farther shore as far as any man knows."

So the runner ate and slept and ate again, and then he started sadly back for Sari.

RELIEVED of the weight of the rope, the balloon soared aloft much higher than it had been when the rope first started to drag in the waters of the nameless strait. Soon it was over the land and the city. Dian looked down and marvelled at this wondrous thing built by men.

It was a mean little city of clay houses and narrow winding streets, but to a cave girl of the Stone Age who had never before seen a city, it was a marvelous thing. It impressed her much as New York City impresses the outlanders from Pittsburgh or Kansas City, who see it for the first time.

The balloon was floating so low now that she could see the people in the streets and on the roofs of the buildings. They were looking up at her in wonder. If Dian had never seen a city, she had at least heard of them; but these people had not only never before seen a balloon, but they had never heard of such a thing.

When the balloon passed over the city and out across the country beyond, hundreds of people ran out and followed it. They followed it for a long way as it slowly came closer and closer to the ground.

Presently Dian saw another city in the distance, and when she came close

to this second city, she was quite close to the ground—perhaps twenty feet above it; then she saw men running from the city. They carried shields and bows and arrows, and for the first time she noticed that those who had followed her all the way from the first city were all men and that they, too, carried shields and bows and arrows.

Before the basket touched the ground the men from the two cities were fighting all around it. At first they fought with bows and arrows, but when they came to close quarters they drew two bladed short-swords from scabbards that hung at their sides and fought hand-to-hand. They shouted and screamed at one another, and altogether made a terrible din.

Dian wished that she could make the balloon go up again, for she did not wish to fall into the hands of such ferocious people, but down came the balloon right in the midst of the fighting. Of course the gas bag dragged it, bumping and jumping along the ground, closer and closer to the second city. Warriors of both sides seized the edge of the basket and pulled and hauled, the men from the first city trying to drag it back and those of the second city trying to haul it on toward their own gates.

"She is ours!" cried one of the latter. "See! She tries to come to Lolo-lolo! Kill the infidels who would steal our Noada!"

"She is ours!" screamed the men of the first city; "we saw her first. Kill the infidels who would cheat us of our Noada!"

Now the basket was near the gates of the city, and suddenly a dozen men rushed forward, seized hold of Dian, lifted her from the basket, and carried her through the gates, which were immediately slammed on friend and foe alike.

Relieved of the weight of Dian, the balloon leaped into the air, and drifted across the city. Even the fighters stopped to watch the miracle.

"Look!" exclaimed a warrior of the second city, "it has brought us our Noada, and now it returns to Karana."

LOLO-LOLO was another city of clay houses and winding, crooked streets through which Dian the Beautiful was escorted with what, she realized, was deepest reverence.

A warrior went ahead, shouting, "Our Noada has come!" and as she passed, the people, making way for her little cortege, knelt, covering their eyes with their hands.

None of this could Dian understand, for she knew nothing of religion, her people being peculiarly free from all superstition. She only knew that these strange people seemed friendly, and that she was being received more as an honored guest than as a prisoner. Everything here was strange to her; the little houses built solidly along both sides of the narrow streets; the yellow skins of the people; the strange garments that they wore—leather aprons, painted with gay designs, that fell from their waists before and behind; the leather helmets of the men; the feather headdress of the women. Neither men nor women wore any garment above the waist, while the children and young people were quite naked.

The armlets and anklets and other metal ornaments of both men and women, as well as the swords, the spear heads, and the arrow tips of the warriors were of a metal strange to Dian. They were bronze, for these people had passed from the Stone Age and the Age of Copper into the Bronze Age. That they were advancing in civilization was attested by the fact that their weapons were more lethal than those of

the Stone Age people—the more civilized people become, the more deadly are the inventions with which they kill one another.

Dian was escorted to an open square in the center of the village. Here the buildings were a little larger, though none was over one story in height. In the center of one side of the quadrangle was a domed building, the most imposing in the city of Lolo-lolo; although to describe it as imposing is a trifle grandiloquent. It was, however, remarkable, in that it was remarkable that these people could design and construct a dome as large as this one.

The shouting warrior who had preceded the escort had run ahead to the entrance of this building, where he shouted, "Our Noada comes!" repeating it until a number of weirdly costumed men emerged. They wore long leather coats covered with painted ornamentation, and the head of each was covered by a hideous mask.

As Dian approached the entrance to the building, these strange figures surrounded her; and, kneeling, covered the eye holes of their masks with their hands.

"Welcome, our Noada! Welcome to your temple in Lolo-lolo! We, your priests, welcome you to The House of the Gods!" they chanted in unison.

The words welcome, priests, and gods were new words to Dian; she did not know what they meant; but she was bright enough to know that she was supposed to, and to realize that they thought her somebody she was not and that this belief of theirs was her best safeguard; so she merely inclined her head graciously and waited for what might come next.

The square behind her had filled with people, who now began to chant a weird pagan song to the beating of drums, as Dian the Beautiful was escorted into The House of the Gods by the priests of Noada.

UNDER the expert direction of Ahgilak, the men of the Amoz set up a jury rig; and once more the ship moved on its journey. A man from Amoz was the compass, sextant, chronometer, and navigator; for the naval base of Pellucidar was the little bay beside which were the cliffs of Amoz. Guided by his inherent homing instinct, he stood beside the wheelsman and pointed toward Amoz. His relief was another Amozite, and the period of his watch was terminated when he felt like sleeping. The arrangement was most satisfactory, and the results obtained were far more accurate than those which might have been had by use of compass, sextant, and chronometer.

The wind had not abated and the seas were still high; but the EPS Amoz wallowed and plowed along toward port, which all aboard were now confident it would reach eventually.

"Dod-burn the old hooker," said Ahgilak; "she'll get there some day, as the feller said."

WHEN O-aa said to Raj, "I am the daughter of a king," the Mezop cocked an ear, for the word had been grafted onto the language of Pellucidar by Abner Perry, and those who had a right to the title were the heads of "kingdoms" that belonged to the federation known as the Empire of Pellucidar. If the girl was just any girl, that was one thing; but if her people belonged to the Federation, that was something very different indeed.

"Who is your father?" demanded Raj.

"Oose, King of Kali," she replied; "and my mate is Hodon the Fleet One, of Sari. My nine brothers are very terrible men."

"Never mind your nine brothers," said Raj; "that you are a Kalian, or that your mate is Hodon of Sari is enough. You will be well treated on this ship."

"And that will be a good thing for you," said O-aa, "for if you hadn't treated me well, I should have killed you. I have killed many men. My nine brothers and I used to raid the village of Suvi all alone, and I always killed more men than any of my brothers. My mother's brother was also a great killer of men, as are my three sisters. Yes, it will be very well for you if you treat me nicely. I always—"

"Shut up," said Raj, "you talk too much and you lie too much. I shall not harm you, but we Mezops beat women who talk too much; we do not like them."

O-aa stuck her chin in the air, but she said nothing; she knew a man of his word when she met one.

"If you are not from Canda," said the sailor who had once seen a man from Canda, "where did you get that feather loin cloth?"

"I took it from La-ak, the Candian, after I had killed him," replied O-aa —and *that* is no lie."

The Sari was blown along before the gale, and at the same time it was in the grip of an ocean current running in the same direction; so it was really making excellent headway, though to O-aa it seemed to be going up and down only.

When they came opposite the Anoroc Islands, the Mezops became restless. They could not see the islands; but they knew exactly the direction in which they lay, and they didn't like the idea of being carried past their home. The four boats of the Sari had been so securely lashed to the deck against the rail that the storm had not been able to tear them away; so Raj suggested to the Sarians that he and his fellow Mezops take two of the boats and paddle to Anaroc, and that the Sarians take the other two and make for shore, since the ship was also opposite Sari.

The high seas made it extremely difficult and dangerous to launch the boats; but the Mezops are excellent sailors, and they finally succeeded in getting both their boats off; and with a final farewell they paddled away over the high seas.

O-aa looked on at all of this with increasing perturbation. She saw the frail boats lifted high on mighty waves only to disappear into the succeeding trough. Sometimes she thought that they would never come up again. She had watched the lowering of the boats and the embarkation of the Mezops with even greater concern; so; when the Sarians were ready to launch their boats, she was in more or less of a blue funk.

They told her to get into the first boat, but she said that she would go in the second—she wanted to delay the dread moment as long as possible. What added to her natural fear of the sea, was the fact that she was quite aware that the Sarians were not good sailors. Always they have lived inland; and had never ventured upon the sea until David and Perry had decreed that they become a naval power, and even then they had always gone as cargo and not as sailors.

O-AA watched the lowering of the first boat in fear and trepidation. They first lowered the boat into the sea with two men in it; these men tried to hold it from pounding against the side of the ship, using paddles for the purpose. They were not entirely successful. O-aa expected any minute to see it smashed to pieces. The other Sar-

ians who were to go in the first boat slid down ropes; and when they were all in the boat, the Sari suddenly heeled over and capsized it. Some of the men succeeded in seizing the ropes down which they had slid, and these were hauled to the deck of the Sari; for the others there was no hope. O-aa watched them drown.

The remaining Sarians were dubious about lowering the second boat; no one likes to be drowned in a high sea full of ravenous reptiles. They talked the matter over.

"If half the men had taken paddles and held the boat away from the Sari, instead of trying to paddle before the ship rolled away from them, the thing would not have happened," said one. Others agreed with him.

"I think we can do it safely," said another. O-aa didn't think so.

"If we drift around on the Sari, we shall die of thirst and starvation," said a third; "we won't have a chance. Once in the boat, we will have a chance. I am for trying it." Finally the others agreed.

The boat was lowered successfully, and a number of men slid down into it to hold it away from the ship's side.

"Down you go," said a man to O-aa, pushing her toward the rail.

"Not I," said O-aa. "I am not going."

"What! You are going to remain on board the Sari alone?" he demanded.

"I am," said O-aa; "and if you ever get to Sari, which you won't, and Hodon is there, tell him that O-aa is out on the Lural Az in the Sari. He will come and get me."

The man shook his head, and slid over the side. The others followed him. O-aa watched them as they fended the boat from the side of the ship until it rolled away from them; then they drove their paddles into the water and stroked mightily until they were out of danger. She watched the boat being tossed about until it was only a speck in the distance. Alone on a drifting derelict on a storm-tossed ocean, O-aa felt much safer than she would have in the little boat which she was sure would never reach land.

O-aa had what she considered an inexhaustible supply of food and water, and some day the Sari would drift ashore; then she would make her way home. The greatest hardship with which she had to put up was the lack of some one with whom to talk; and, for O-aa, that was a real hardship.

The wind blew the ship toward the southwest, and the ocean current hastened it along in the same direction. O-aa slept many times, and it was still noon. The storm had long since abated. Great, smooth swells lifted the Sari gently and gently lowered it. Where before the ocean had belabored the ship, now it caressed her.

WHEN O-aa was awake she was constantly searching for land, and at last she saw it. It was very dim and far away; but she was sure that it was land, and the Sari was approaching it —but, oh, so slowly. She watched until she could no longer hold her eyes open, and then she slept. How long she slept no man may know; but when she awoke the land was very close, but the Sari was moving parallel with it and quite rapidly. O-aa knew that she could never reach the land if the ship kept on its present course, but there was nothing that she could do about it.

A strong current runs through the nameless strait from the Sojar Az, into which the Sari had drifted, to the Korsar Az, a great ocean that bounds the western shore of the land mass on which Sari is located. None of this O-aa knew, nor did she know that the land off the

port side of the Sari was that dread terra incognita of her people.

The wind, that had been blowing gently from the east, changed into the north and increased, carrying the Sari closer inshore. Now she was so close that O-aa could plainly discern things on land. She saw something that aroused her curiosity, for she had never seen anything like it before; it was a walled city. She had not the slightest idea what it was. Presently she saw people emerging from it; they were running down to the shore toward which the Sari was drifting. As they came closer, O-aa saw that there were many warriors.

O-aa had never seen a city before, and these people had never seen a ship. The Sari was drifting in bow on, and O-aa was standing on the stump of the bowsprit, a brave figure in her red and yellow feather loincloth and the three feathers in her hair.

The Sari was quite close to shore now and the people could see O-aa plainly. Suddenly they fell upon their knees and covered their eyes with their hands, crying, "Welcome, our Noada! The true Noada has come to Tanga-tanga!"

Just then the Sari ran aground and O-aa was pitched headforemost into the water. O-aa had learned to swim in a lake above Kali, where there were no reptiles; but she knew that these waters were full of them; she had seen them often; so when she came to the surface she began swimming for shore as though all the saurians in the world were at heels. Esther Williams would not have been ashamed of the time in which that little cave girl of Kali made the 100 meters to shore.

As she scrambled ashore, the awe-struck warriors of Tanga-tanga knelt again and covered their eyes with their hands. O-aa glanced down to see if she had lost her loincloth, and was relieved to find that she had not.

O-AA looked at the kneeling warriors in amazement; the situation was becoming embarrassing. "What are you doing that for," she demanded. "Why don't you get up?"

"May we stand in your presence?" asked a warrior.

O-aa thought quickly; perhaps this was a case of mistaken identity, but she might as well make the best of it. If they were afraid of her, it might be well to keep them that way.

"I'll think it over," she said.

Glancing around, she saw some of the warriors peeking at her; but the moment she looked at them they lowered their heads. Even after they had looked at her, O-aa discovered, they still didn't realized their mistake. She saw that they were yellow men, with painted leather aprons, and strange weapons, they wore helmets that O-aa thought were very becoming.

After she had taken her time looking them over, she said, "Now you may stand;" and they all arose.

Several of the warriors approached her. "Our Noada," one of them said, "we have been waiting for you for a long time—ever since the first Xexot learned that only with your help can we hope to reach Karana after we die; perhaps that was a million sleeps ago. Our priests told us that some time you would come. Not so many sleeps ago one came out of the air whom we thought was our Noada, but now we know that she was a false Noada. Come with us to Tang-tanga, where your priests will take you into your temple."

O-aa was puzzled. Much that the man had said to her was as Greek to a Hottentot; but little O-aa was smart enough to realize that she seemed to be sitting pretty, and she wasn't going to upset the apple cart by asking ques-

tions. Her greatest fear was that they might start asking her questions.

DIAN the Beautiful had learned many things since she had come to the city of Lolo-lolo; and she had learned them without asking too many questions, for one of the first things she had learned was that she was supposed to know everything—even what people were thinking.

She had learned that this race of yellow men called themselves Xexots; and that she had come direct from a place called Karana, which was up in the sky somewhere, and that if they were good, she would see that they were sent there when they died; but if they were bad, she could send them to the Molop Az, the flaming sea upon which Pellucidar floats.

She already knew about the Molop Az, as what Pellucidarian does not? The dead who are buried in the ground go there; they are carried down, piece by piece, to the Molop Az by the wicked little men who dwell there. Everyone knows this, because when graves are opened it is always discovered that the bodies have been partially or entirely borné off. That is why many of the peoples of Pellucidar place their dead in trees where the birds may find them and carry them bit by bit to the Dead World that hangs above the Land of Awful Shadow. When people killed an enemy, they always buried his body in the ground; so that it would be sure to go to Molop Az.

She also discovered that being a Noada was even more important than being an empress. Here in Lolo-lolo, even the king dwelt down and covered his eyes when he approached her; nor did he arise again until she had given him permission.

It all puzzled Dian a great deal, but she was learning. People brought her presents of food and ornaments and leather and many, many little pieces of metal, thin and flat and with eight sides. These the priests, who eventually took most of the presents, seemed to value more than anything else; and if there were not a goodly supply left in the temple every day, they became very angry and scolded the people. But no matter how puzzled she was, Dian dared not ask questions; for she was intuitively aware that if they came to doubt that she was allwise, they would doubt that she was really a Noada; and then it would go hard with her. After they had worshipped her so devoutly, they might tear her to pieces if they discovered that she was an imposter.

The king of Lolo-lolo was called a go-sha; his name was Gamba. He came often to worship at the shrine of the Noada. The high priest, Hor, said that he had never come to the temple before except on feast days; when he could get plenty to eat and drink and watch the dancing.

"You are very beautiful, my Noada," said Hor; "perhaps that is why the go-sha comes more often now."

"Perhaps he wants to go to Karana when he dies," suggested Dian.

"I hope that that is all he wants," said Hor. "He has been a very wicked man, failing to pay due respect to the priesthood and even deriding them. It is said that he does not believe in Karana or Molop Az or the teachings of Pu and that he used to say that no Noada would ever come to Lolo-lolo because there was no such thing as a Noada."

"Now he knows better," said Dian.

SHORTLY after this conversation, Gamba came to the temple while Hor was asleep; he knelt before Dian and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Arise, Gamba," said Dian.

She was seated on a little platform upon a carved stool covered with painted leather and studded with bronze; she wore a soft leather robe fastened at the waist with a girdle. The robe was caught over one shoulder, leaving the other bare, and on one side it was slit to her hip and fastened there with a bronze disc. Around her neck were eight strands of carved ivory beads, each strand of a different length, the longest reaching below her waist. Bronze bracelets and anklets adorned her limbs, while surmounting this barbaric splendor was a headdress of feathers.

Dian the Beautiful, who had never before worn more than a sketchy loin cloth, was most uncomfortable in all this finery, not being sufficiently advanced in civilization to appreciate the necessity for loading the feminine form with a lot of useless and silly gew-gaws. She knew that Nature had created her beautiful and that no outward adornment could enhance her charms.

Gamba appeared to be in hearty accord with this view, as his eyes seemed to ignore the robe. Dian did not like the look in them.

"Did the go-sha come to worship?" inquired Dian the Goddess.

Gamba smiled. Was there a suggestion of irony in that smile? Dian thought so.

"I came to visit," replied Gamba. "I do not have to come here to worship you—that I do always."

"It is well that you worship your Noada," said Dian; "Pu will be pleased."

"It is not the Noada I worship," said Gamba, boldly; "it is the woman."

"The Noada is not pleased," said Dian, icily; "nor is Pu; nor will Hor, the high priest, be pleased."

Gamba laughed. "Hor may fool the rest of them; but he doesn't fool me, and I don't believe that he fools you. I don't know what accident brought you here, nor what that thing was you came in; but I do know you are just a woman, for there is no such thing as a Noada; and there are a lot of my nobles and warriors who think just as I do."

"The Noada is not interested," said Dian, "the go-sha may leave."

GAMBA settled himself comfortably on the edge of the dais. "I am the go-sha," he said; "I come and go as I please. I please to remain."

"Then *I* shall leave," said Dian, rising.

"Wait," said Gamba. "If you are as wise as I think you are, you will see that it is better to have Gamba for a friend than an enemy. The people are dissatisfied; Hor bleeds them for all he can get out of them; and since he has had you with whom to frighten them, he has bled them worse. His priests threaten them with your anger if they do not bring more gifts, especially pieces of bronze; and Hor is getting richer, and the people are getting poorer. They say now that they have nothing left with which to pay taxes; soon the go-sha will not have the leather to cover his nakedness."

"Of these things, you should speak to Hor," said Dian.

"By that speech you convict yourself," exclaimed Gamba, triumphantly, "but yours is a difficult role; I am surprised that you have not tripped before."

"I do not know what you mean," said Dian.

"The Noada is the representative of Pu in Pellucidar, according to Hor; she is omnipotent; she decides; she commands—not Hor. When you tell me to speak to Hor of the things of which

the people complain, you admit that it is Hor who commands—not you."

"The Noada does command," snapped Dian; "she commands you to take your complaints to Hor; just as the common people take their complaints to the lesser priests—they do not burden their Noada with them, nor should you. If they warrant it, Hor will lay them before me."

Gamba slapped his thigh. "By Pu!" he exclaimed; "but you are a bright girl. You slipped out of that one very cleverly. Come! let us be friends. We could go a long way together in Lolo-lolo. Being the wife of the go-sha would not be so bad, and a lot more fun than being a Noada cooped up in a temple like a prisoner—which you are. Yes, you are a prisoner; and Hor is your jailer. Think it over, Noada; think it over."

"Think what over?" demanded a voice from the side of the room.

They both turned. It was Hor. He came and knelt before Dian, covering his eyes with his hands; then he rose and glared at Gamba, but he spoke to Dian. "You permit this man to sit upon this holy spot?" he demanded.

Gamba eyed Dian intently, waiting for her reply. It came: "If it pleases him," she said, haughtily.

"It is against the laws that govern the temple," said Hor.

"I make the laws which govern the temple," said Dian; "and I make the laws which govern the people of Lolo-lolo," and she looked at Gamba.

Hor looked very uncomfortable. Gamba was grinning. Dian rose. "You are both excused," she said, and it sounded like a command—it was a command. Then Dian stepped down from the dais and walked toward the door of the temple.

"Where are you going?" demanded Hor.

"I am going to walk in the streets of Lolo-lolo and speak with my people."

"But you can't," cried Hor. "It is against the rules of the temple."

"Didn't you just hear your Noada say that she makes the temple laws?" asked Gamba, still grinning.

"Wait, then," cried Hor, "until I summon the priests and the drums."

"I wish no priests and no drums," said Dian. "I wish to walk alone."

"I will go with you." Gamba and Hor spoke in unison, as though the line had been rehearsed.

"I said that I wished to go alone," said Dian; and with that, she passed through the great doorway of the temple out into the eternal sunlight of the square.

"Well," said Gamba to Hor, "you got yourself a Noada, didn't you?" and he laughed ironically as he said it.

"I shall pray Pu to guide her," said Hor, but his expression was more that of an executioner than a suppliant.

"She'll probably guide Pu," said Gamba.

AS THE people saw their Noada walking alone in the square, they were filled with consternation; they fell upon their knees at her approach and covered their eyes with their hands until she bade them arise. She stopped before a man and asked him what he did.

"I work in bronze," said the man. "I made those bracelets that you are wearing, Noada."

"You make many pieces for your work?" Dian had never known a money system before she came to Lolo-lolo; but here she had learned that one could get food and other things in exchange for pieces of bronze, often called "pieces" for short. They were brought in quantities to the temple and given to her, but Hor took them.

Dian sat erect with a gasp of fright as the grim masked figure advanced

"I get many pieces for my work," replied the man, "but—" He hung his head and was silent.

"But what?" asked Dian.

"I am afraid to say," said the man; "I should not have spoken."

"I command you to speak," said Dian.

"The priests demand most of what I make, and the go-sha wants the rest. I have barely enough left to buy food."

"How much were you paid for these bracelets that I am wearing?" demanded Dian.

"Nothing."

"Why nothing?"

"The priests said that I should make them and give them as an offering to the Noada, who would forgive my sins and see that I got into Karana when I died."

"How much are they worth?"

"They are worth at least two hundred pieces," said the man; "they are the most beautiful bracelets in Lololo."

"Come with me," said Dian, and she continued across the square.

On the opposite side of the square from the temple was the house of the go-sha. Before the entrance stood a number of warriors on guard duty. They knelt and covered their eyes as Noada approached, but when they arose and Dian saw their faces she saw no reverence there—only fear and hate.

"You are fighting men," said Dian. "Are you treated well?"

"We are treated as well as the slaves," said one, bitterly.

"We are given the leavings from the tables of the go-sha and the nobles, and we have no pieces with which to buy more," said another.

"Why have you no pieces? Do you fight for nothing?"

"We are supposed to get five pieces every time the go-sha sleeps, but we have not been paid for many sleeps."

"Why?"

"The go-sha says that it is because the priests take all the pieces for you," said the first warrior, boldly.

"Come with me," said Dian.

"We are on guard here, and we cannot leave."

"I, your Noada, command it; come!" said Dian, imperiously.

"If we do as the Noada commands us," said one, "she will protect us."

"But Gamba will have us beaten," said another.

"Gamba will not have you beaten if you always obey me. It is Gamba who will be beaten if he harms you for obeying me."

THE warriors followed her as she stopped and talked with men and women, each of which had a grievance against either the priests or the go-sha. Each one she commanded to follow her; and finally, with quite a goodly procession following her, she returned to the temple.

Gamba and Hor had been standing in the entrance watching her; now they followed her into the temple. She mounted the dais and faced them.

"Gamba and Hor," she said, "you did not kneel as your Noada passed you at the temple door. You may kneel now."

The men hesitated. They were being humiliated before common citizens and soldiers. Hor was the first to weaken; he dropped to his knees and covered his eyes. Gamba looked up defiantly at Dian. Just the shadow of a smile, tinged by irony, played upon her lips. She turned her eyes upon the soldiers standing beside Gamba.

"Warriors," she said, "take this—" She did not have to say more, for Gamba had dropped to his knees; he

had guessed what was in her mind and trembling on her lips.

After she had allowed the two to rise, she spoke to Hor. "Have many pieces of bronze brought," she said.

"What for?" asked Hor.

"The Noada does not have to explain what she wishes to do with her own," said Dian.

"But Noada," spluttered Hor; "the pieces belong to the temple."

"The pieces and the temple, too, belong to me; the temple was built for me, the pieces were brought as gifts for me. Send for them."

"How many?" asked Hor.

"All that six priests can carry. If I need more, I can send them back."

With six priests trailing him, Hor left the apartment, trembling with rage; but he got many pieces of bronze, and he had them brought into the throne room of the temple.

"To that man," said Dian, pointing at the worker in bronze, "give two hundred pieces in payment for these bracelets for which he was never paid."

"But, Noada," expostulated Hor, "the bracelets were gift offerings."

"They were forced offerings—give the man the pieces." She turned to Gamba. "How many times have you slept since your warriors were last paid?"

Gamba flushed under his yellow skin. "I do not know," he said, surlily.

"How many?" she asked the warriors.

"Twenty-one times," said one of them.

"Give each of these men five pieces for each of the twenty-one sleeps," directed Dian, "and have all the warriors come immediately to get theirs"; then she directed the payment of various sums to each of the others who had accompanied her to the temple.

Hor was furious; but Gamba, as he came to realize what this meant, was enjoying it, especially Hor's discomfiture; and Dian became infinitely more desirable to him than she had been before. What a mate she would be for a go-sha!

"Now," said Dian, when all had received their pieces, "hereafter, all offerings to your Noada will be only what you can afford to give—perhaps one piece out of every ten or twenty; and to your go-sha, the same. Between sleeps I shall sit here, and Hor will pay to everyone who comes the number of pieces each has been forced to give. Those who think one piece in ten is fair, may return that amount to Hor. If you have any other grievances, bring them to your Noada; and they will be corrected. You may depart now."

They looked at her in wonder and adoration, the citizens and the warriors whose eyes had first been filled with fear and hatred of her; and after they had kneeled, they paid to Hor one piece out of every ten they had received. Laughing and jubilant, they left the temple to spread the glad tidings through the city.

"Pu will be angry," said Hor; "the pieces were Pu's."

"You are a fool," said Dian, "and if you don't mend your ways I shall appoint a new high priest."

"You can't do that," Hor almost screamed, "and you can't have any more of my pieces of bronze."

"You see," said Gamba to Dian, "that what I told you is true—Hor collects all the pieces for himself."

"I spoke with many people in the square before the temple," said Dian, "and I learned many things from them—one of them is that they hate you and they hate me. That is why I called you a fool, Hor; because you do not know that these people are about ready to rise up and kill us all—the robbed

citizens and the unpaid warriors. After I return their pieces that have been stolen from them, they will still hate you two; but they will not hate me; therefore, if you are wise, you will always do what I tell you to do—and don't forget that I am your Noada."

DIAN slept. Her sleeping apartment was darkened against the eternal noonday sun. She lay on a leather couch—a tanned hide stretched over a crude wooden frame. She wore only a tiny loin cloth, for the apartment was warm. She dreamed of David.

A man crept into her apartment on bare feet, and moved silently toward the couch. Dian stirred restlessly; and the man stopped, waiting. Dian dreamed that a tarag was creeping upon David; and she leaped up, awake, to warn him; so that she stood face to face with one of the lesser priests who carried a slim bronze dagger in one hand.

Face to face with Death in that darkened chamber, Dian thought fast. She saw that the man was trembling, as he raised the dagger to the height of his shoulder—in a moment, he would leap forward and strike.

Dian stamped her foot upon the floor. "Kneel!" she commanded, imperiously.

The man hesitated; his dagger hand dropped to his side, and he fell to his knees.

"Drop the dagger," said Dian. The man dropped it, and Dian snatched it from the floor.

"Confess!" directed the girl. "Who sent you here? but do I need ask? It was Hor?"

The priest nodded. "May Pu forgive me, for I did not wish to come. Hor threatened me; he said he would have me killed if I did not do this thing."

"You may go now," said Dian, "and do not come again."

"You will never see me again, my Noada," said the priest. "Hor lied; he said you were not the true Noada, but now I know that you are—Pu watches over and protects you."

After the priest had left the apartment, Dian dressed slowly and went to the temple throne room. As usual, she was ushered in by priests to the accompaniment of drums and chants. The priests, she noticed, were nervous; they kept glancing at her apprehensively. She wondered if they, too, had been commissioned to kill her.

The room was filled with people—priests, citizens, warriors. Gamba was there and Hor. The latter dropped to his knees and covered his eyes long before she was near him. There seemed to be considerable excitement among all those who were present. By the time she took her place upon the dais everyone in the room was kneeling. After she had bidden them arise, they pressed forward to lay their grievances at her feet. She saw the priests whispering excitedly among themselves.

"What has happened, Hor?" she asked. "Why is everyone so excited?"

Hor cleared his throat. "It was nothing," he said; "I would not annoy my Noada with it."

"Answer my question," snapped Dian.

"One of the lesser priests was found hanging by his neck in his room," explained Hor. "He was dead."

"I know," said Dian; "it was the priest called Saj."

"Our Noada knows all," whispered one citizen to another.

AFTER the people had aired their grievances and those who felt that they had been robbed were reimbursed, Dian spoke to all those assembled in the temple.

"Here are the new laws," she said: "Of all the pieces of bronze which you receive, give one out of ten to the go-sha. These pieces will be used to keep the city clean and in repair and to pay the warriors who defend Lolo-lolo. Give the same number of pieces for the support of my temple. Out of these pieces the temple will be kept in repair, the priests fed and paid, and some will be given to the go-sha for the pay of his warriors, if he does not have enough, for the warriors defend the temple. You will make these payments after each twenty sleeps. Later, I will select an honest citizen to look after the temple pieces.

"Now, one thing more. I want fifty warriors to watch over me at all times. They will be the Noada's Guard. After every sleep that your Noada sleeps, each warrior will receive ten pieces. Are there fifty among you who would like to serve on the Noada's Guard?"

Every warrior in the temple stepped forward, and from them Dian selected the fifty largest and strongest.

"I shall sleep better hereafter," she said to Hor. Hor said nothing.

But if Hor said nothing, he was doing a great deal of thinking; for he knew that if he were ever to regain his power and his riches, he must rid himself of the new Noada.

While the temple was still jammed with citizens and warriors, alarm drums sounded outside in the city; and as the warriors were streaming into the square, a messenger came running from the city gates.

"The Tanga-tangas have come!" he cried; "they have forced the gates and they are in the city!"

Instantly all was confusion; the citizens ran in one direction—away from the gates—and the warriors ran in the other to meet the raiding Tanga-tangas. Gamba ran out with his warriors, just an undisciplined mob with bronze swords. A few had spears, but the bows and arrows of all of them were in their barracks.

The fifty warriors whom Dian had chosen remained to guard her and the temple. The lesser priests fell to praying, repeating over and over, "Our Noada will give us victory! Our Noada will save us!" But Hor was more practical; he stopped their praying long enough to have them close the massive temple doors and bar them securely; then he turned to Dian.

"Turn back the enemy," he said; "strike them dead with the swords of our warriors, drive them from the city, and let them take no prisoners back into slavery. Only you can save us."

Dian noticed an exultant note in Hor's voice, but she guessed that he was not exulting in her power to give victory to the Lolo-lolos. She was on a spot, and she knew it.

THEY heard the shouting of fighting men and the clash of weapons, the screams of the wounded and the dying. They heard the battle sweep into the square before the temple; there was clamoring before the temple doors and the sound of swords beating upon them.

Hor was watching Dian. "Destroy them, Noada!" he cried with thinly veiled contempt in his voice.

The massive doors withstood the attack, and the battle moved on beyond the temple. Later it swept back, and Dian could hear the victory cries of the Tanga-tangas. After a while the sounds died away in the direction of the city gates; and the warriors opened the temple doors, for they knew that the enemy had departed.

In the square lay the bodies of many dead; they were thick before the temple doors—mute evidence of the valor with which the warriors of Lolo-lolo had de-

fended their Noada.

When the results of the raid were finally known, it was discovered that over a hundred of Gamba's warriors had been killed and twice that number wounded; that all the Tanga-tangan slaves in the city had been liberated and that over a hundred men and women of Lolo-lolo had been taken away into slavery; while the Lolo-loloans had taken but a single prisoner.

This prisoner was brought to the temple and questioned in the presence of Dian and Gamba and Hor. He was very truculent and cocky.

"We won a great victory," he said; "and if you do not liberate me the warriors of our Noada will come again, and this time they will leave not a single Lolo-loloan alive that they do not take back into slavery."

"You have no Noada," said Gamba. "There is only one Noada, and she is here."

The prisoner laughed derisively. "How then did we win such a glorious victory?" he demanded. "It was with the help of our Noada, the true Noada —this one here is a false Noada; our victory proves it."

"There is only one Noada," said Hor, but he didn't say which one.

"You are right," agreed the prisoner; "there is only one Noada, and she is in Tanga-tanga. She came in a great temple that floated upon the water, and she leaped into the sea and swam to the shore where we were waiting to receive her. She swam through the waters that are infested with terrible monsters, but she was unharmed; only Pu or a Noada could do that—and now she has given us this great victory."

THE people of Lolo-lolo were crushed; scarcely a family but had had a member killed, wounded, or taken into slavery. They had no heart for anything; they left the dead lying in the square and in the streets until the stench became unbearable, and all the time the lesser priests, at the instigation of Hor, went among them, whispering that their Noada was a false Noada, or otherwise this catastrophe would never have befallen them.

Only a few came to the temple now to worship, and few were the offerings brought. One, bolder than another, asked Dian why she had let this disaster overwhelm them. Dian knew that she must do something to counteract the effects of the gossip that the lesser priests were spreading, or her life would not be worth a single piece of bronze. She knew of the work of Hor and the priests, for one of the warriors who guarded her had told her.

"It was not I who brought this disaster upon you," she answered the man; "it was Pu. He was punishing Lolo-lolo because of the wickedness of those who robbed and cheated the people of Lolo-lolo."

It was not very logical; but then the worshippers of Pu were not very logical, or they would not have worshipped him; and those who heard her words, spread them through the city; and there arose a faction with which Hor and the lesser priests were not very popular.

Dian sent for Gamba and commanded him to have the dead removed from the city and disposed of, for the stench was so terrible that one could scarcely breathe.

"How can I have them removed?" he asked; "no longer have we any slaves to do such work."

"The men of Lolo-lolo can do it, then," said Dian.

"They will not," Gamba told her.

"Then take warriors and compel them to do it," snapped the Noada.

"I am your friend," said Gamba,

"but I cannot do that for you—the people would tear me to pieces."

"Then *I* shall do it," said Dian, and she summoned her warrior guard and told them to collect enough citizens to remove the dead from the city; "and you can take Hor and all the other priests with you, too," she added.

Hor was furious. "I will not go," he said.

"Take him!" snapped Dian, and a warrior prodded him in the small of the back with his spear and forced him out into the square.

Gamba looked at her with admiration. "Noada or not," he said, "you are a very brave woman. With you as my mate, I could defy all my enemies and conquer Tanga-tanga into the bargain."

"I am not for you," said Dian.

THE city was cleaned up, but too late—an epidemic broke out. Men and women died; and the living were afraid to touch them, nor would Dian's guard again force the citizens to do this work. Once more the lesser priests went among the people spreading the word that the disasters which had befallen them were all due to the false Noada.

"Pu," they said, "is punishing us because we have received her."

Thus things went from bad to worse for Dian the Beautiful; until, at last, it got so bad that crowds gathered in the square before the temple, cursing and reviling her; and then those who still believed in her, incited by the agents of Gamba, fell upon them; and there was rioting and bloodshed.

Hor took advantage of this situation to spread the rumor that Gamba and the false Noada were planning to destroy the temple and rule the city, defying Pu and the priests; and that when this happened, Pu would lay waste the city and hurl all the people into the Molop Az. This was just the sort of propaganda of terror that would influence an ignorant and superstitious people. Remember, they were just simple people of the Bronze Age. They had not yet reached that stage of civilization where they might send children on holy crusades to die by thousands; they were not far enough advanced to torture unbelievers with rack and red hot irons, or burn heretics at the stake; so they believed this folderol that more civilized people would have spurned with laughter while killing all Jews.

At last Gamba came to Dian. "My own warriors are turning against me," he told her. "They believe the stories that Hor is spreading; so do most of the citizens. There are some who believe in you yet and some who are loyal to me; but the majority have been terrified into believing that Hor speaks the truth and that if they do not destroy us, Pu will destroy them."

"What are we to do?" asked Dian.

"The only chance we have to live, is to escape from the city," replied Gamba, "and even that may be impossible. We are too well known to escape detection—your white skin would betray you, and every man, woman, and child in Lolo-lolo knows his go-sha."

"We might fight our way out," suggested Dian. "I am sure that my warriors are still loyal to me."

Gamba shook his head. "They are not," he said. "Some of my own warriors have told me that they are no longer your protectors, but your jailers. Hor has won them over by threats and bribery."

Dian thought a moment, and then she said, "I have a plan—listen." She whispered for a few minutes to Gamba, and when she had finished, Gamba left the temple; and Dian went to her sleeping apartment— but she did not sleep.

Instead, she stripped off her robe of office and donned her own single garment that she had worn when she first came to Lolo-lolo; then she put the long leather robe on over it.

By a back corridor she came to room that she knew would be used only before and after ceremonies; in it were a number of large chests. Dian sat down on one of them and waited.

A MAN came into the temple with his head so bandaged that only one eye was visible; he had come, as so many came, to be healed by his Noada. Unless they died, they were always healed eventually.

The temple was almost deserted; only the members of the Noada's Guard loitered there near the entrance. They were there on Hor's orders to see that the Noada did not escape, Hor having told them that she was planning to join Gamba in his house across the square, from which they were arranging to launch their attack against the temple.

The man wore the weapons of a common warrior, and he appeared very tired and weak, probably from loss of blood. He said nothing; he just went and waited before the throne, waited for his Noada to come—the Noada that would never come again. After a while he commenced to move about the throne room, looking at different objects. Occasionally he glanced toward the warriors loitering near the door. They paid no attention to him. In fact they had just about forgotten him when he slipped through a doorway at the opposite side of the room.

The temple was very quiet, and there were only a few people in the square outside. The noonday sun beat down; and, as always, only those who had business outside were in the streets. Lolo-lolo was lethargic; but it was the calm before the storm. The lesser priests and the other enemies of Gamba and the Noada were organizing the mob that was about to fall upon them and destroy them. In many houses were groups of citizens and warriors waiting for the signal.

Two priests came into the throne room of the temple; they wore their long, leather robes of office and their hideous masks; they passed out of the temple through the group of warriors loitering by the door. Once out in the square, they commenced to cry, "Come, all true followers of Pu! Death to the false Noada! Death to Gamba!" It was the signal!

Warriors and citizens poured from houses surrounding the square. Some of them ran toward the house of the go-sha, and some ran for the temple; and they were all shouting, "Death! Death to Gamba! Death to the false Noada!"

The two priests crossed the square and followed one of the winding streets beyond, chanting their hymn of death; and as they passed, more citizens and warriors ran screaming toward the square, thirsting for the blood of their quarry.

THE survivors of the Amoz had finally brought the ship into the harbor beneath the cliffs of Amoz. David and Hodon and Ghak the Hairy One and the little old man whose name was not Dolly Dorcas had at last completed the long trek from Amoz and come again to Sari.

David found the people saddened and Perry in tears. "What is the matter?" he demanded. "What is wrong? Where is Dian, that she has not come to meet me?"

Perry was sobbing so, that he could not answer. The headman, who had been in charge during their absence, spoke: "Dian the Beautiful is lost to

us," he said.

"Lost! What do you mean?" demanded David; then they told him, and David Innes's world crumbled from beneath him. He looked long at Perry, and then he went and placed a hand upon his shoulder. "You loved her, too," he said; "you would not have harmed her. Tears will do no good. Build me another balloon, and perhaps it will drift to the same spot to which she was carried."

They both worked on the new balloon; in fact everyone in Sari worked on it, and the work gave them relief from sorrowing. Many hunters went out, and the dinosaurs which were to furnish the peritonea for the envelope of the gas bag were soon killed. While they were out hunting, the women wove the basket and braided the many feet of rope; and while this was going on, the runner returned from Thoria.

David was in Sari when he came, and the man came at once to him. "I have news of Dian the Beautiful," he said. "A man of Thoria saw the balloon floating across the nameless strait at the end of the world, high in the air."

"Could he see if Dian was still in it?" asked David.

"No," replied the runner, "it was too high in the air."

"At least we know where to look," said David, but his heart was heavy; because he knew that there was little chance that Dian could have survived the cold, the hunger, and the thirst.

Before the second balloon was finished, the survivors of the Sari returned to the village; and they told Hodon all that they knew of O-aa. "She told us to tell you," said one, "that she was adrift in the Sari on the Lural Az. She said that when you knew that, you would come and get her."

Hodon turned to David. "May I have men and a ship with which to go in search of O-aa?" he asked.

"You may have the ship and as many men as you need," replied David.

CHANTING their horrid song of death, the two priests walked through the narrow streets of Lolo-lolo all the way to the gates of the city. "Go to the great square," they shouted to the guard. "Hor has sent us to summon you. Every fighting man is needed to overcome those who would defend the false Noada and Gamba. Hurry! We will watch the gates."

The warriors hesitated. "It is Hor's command," said one of the priests; "and with Gamba and the Noada dead, Hor will rule the city; so you had better obey him, if you know what's good for you."

The warriors thought so, too; and they hurried off toward the square. When they had gone, the two priests opened the gates and passed out of the city. Turning to the right, they crossed to a forest into which they disappeared; and as soon as they were out of sight of the city, they removed their masks and their robes of office.

"You are not only a very brave girl," said Gamba, "but you are a very smart one."

"I am afraid that I shall have to be a whole lot smarter," replied Dian, "if I am ever to get back to Sari."

"What is Sari?" asked Gamba.

"It is the country from which I came."

"I thought you came from Karana," said Gamba.

"Oh, no you didn't," said Dian, and they both laughed.

"Where is Sari?" asked Gamba.

"It is across the nameless strait," replied Dian. "Do you know where we might find a canoe?"

"What is a canoe?" asked Gamba.

Dian was surprised. Was it possible

that this man did not know what a canoe was? "It is what men use to cross the water in," she replied.

"But no one ever crosses the water," protested Gamba. "No one could live on the nameless strait. It is full of terrible creatures; and when the wind blows, the water stands up on end."

"We shall have to build a canoe," said Dian.

"If my Noada says so, we shall have to build a canoe," said Gamba, with mock reverence.

"My name is Dian," said the girl; so the man who had been a king and the woman who had been a goddess went down through the forest toward the shore of the nameless strait.

Beneath the long robes of the priests, they had brought what weapons they could conceal. They each had a sword and a dagger, and Gumba had a bow and many arrows.

On the way to the shore, Dian looked for trees suitable for the building of a canoe. She knew that it would be a long and laborious job; but if the Mezops could do it with stone tools, it should be much easier with the daggers and swords of bronze; and then, of course, there was always fire with which to hollow out the inside.

When they came to the shore of the nameless strait, they followed it until Gamba was sure there would be no danger of their being discovered by the people of Lolo-lolo or the people of Tanga-tanga.

"They do not come in this direction much," he said, "nor often so far from the cities. The hunters go more in the other direction or inland. There are supposed to be dangerous animals here, and there is said to be a tribe of wild savages who come up from below to hunt here."

"We should have an interesting time building the canoe," commented Dian.

AT LAST the second balloon was completed. It was just like the first, except that it had a rip cord and was stocked with food and water, David's extra weight and the weight of the food and water being compensated for by the absence of the heavy rope which had been attached to the first balloon.

When the time came to liberate the great bag, the people of Sari stood in silence. They expected that they would never see David Innes again, and David shared their belief.

"Dod-burn it!" exclaimed the little old man whose name was not Dolly Dorcas, "there goes a *man,* as the feller said."

Ope, the high priest of the temple at Tanga-tanga, had acquired a Noada; but she was not at all what he had imagined Noada should be. At first she had been docile and tractable, amenable to suggestion; that was while O-aa was learning the ropes, before she learned that she was supposed to be all-wise and all-powerful, deriving her omniscience and omnipotence from some one they called Pu who dwelt in a place called Karana.

Later on, she became somewhat of a trial to Ope. In the first place, she had no sense of the value of pieces of bronze. When they were brought as offerings to her, she would wait until she had a goodly collection in a large bowl which stood beside her throne; then, when the temple was filled with people, she would scoop handfuls of the pieces from the bowl and throw them to the crowd, laughing as she watched them scramble for them.

This made O-aa very popular with the people, but it made Ope sad. He had never had such large congregations in the temple before, but the net profits had never been so small. Ope spoke to the Noada about this—timidly, be-

cause, unlike Hor of Lolo-lolo, he was a simple soul and guileless; he believed in the divinity of the Noada.

Furp, the go-sha of Tanga-tanga, was not quite so simple; but, like many an agnostic, he believed in playing safe. However, he talked this matter over with Ope, because it had long been the custom for Ope to split the temple take with him, and now his share was approaching the vanishing point, so he suggested to Ope that it might be well to suggest to the Noada that, while charity was a sweet thing, it really should begin at home. So Ope spoke to the Noada, and Furp listened.

"Why," he asked, "does the Noada throw away the offerings that are brought to the temple?"

"Because the people like them," replied O-aa. "Haven't you noticed how they scramble for them?"

"They belong to the temple."

"They are brought to *me*," contradicted O-aa. "Anyway, I don't see why you should make a fuss over some little pieces of metal. I do not want them. What good are they?"

"Without them we could not pay the priests, or buy food, or keep the temple in repair," explained Ope.

"Bosh!" exclaimed O-aa, or an expletive with the same general connotation. "The people bring food, which we can eat; and the priests could keep the temple in repair in payment for their food; they are a lazy lot, anyway. I have tried to find out what they do besides going around frightening people into bringing gifts, and wearing silly masks, and dancing. Where I come from, they would either hunt or work."

Ope was aghast. "But you come from Karana, Noada!" he exclaimed. "No one works in Karana."

O-AA realized that she had pulled a boner, and that she would have to do a little quick thinking. She did.

"How do you know?" she demanded. "Were you ever in Karana?"

"No, Noada," admitted Ope.

Furp was becoming more and more confused, but he was sure of one point, and he brought it out. "Pu would be angry," he said, "if he knew that you were throwing away the offerings that the people brought to his temple, and Pu can punish even a Noada."

"Pu had better not interfere," said O-aa; "my father is a king, and my eleven brothers are very strong men."

"What?" screamed Ope. "Do you know what you are saying?" Pu is all-powerful, and anyway, a Noada has no father and no brothers."

"Were you ever a Noada?" asked O-aa. "No, of course you never were. It is time you learned something about Noadas. Noadas have a lot of everything. I have not one father only, but three, and beside my eleven brothers, I have four sisters, and they are all Noadas. Pu is my son, he does what I tell him to. Is there anything more you would like to know about Noadas?"

Ope and Fury discussed this conversation in private later on. "I never before knew all those things about Noadas," said Ope.

"Our Noada seems to know what she's talking about," observed Furp.

"She is evidently more powerful than Pu," argued Ope, "as otherwise he would have struck her dead for the things she said about him."

"Perhaps we had better worship our Noada instead of Pu," suggested Furp.

"You took the words out of my mouth," said Ope.

Thus, O-aa was sitting pretty in Tanga-tanga, as Hodon the Fleet One set sail from Amoz on his hopeless quest and David Innes drifted toward the end of the world in the Dinosaur II, as Perry christened his second balloon.

SARKER'S JOKE BOX

by RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

A little patient sweating inside his shell and Sarker could laugh at the law. He would be free.

CLAY SARKER had me covered with his ugly heat-pistol. Kotah, the little Venusian scientist he'd held captive for so long, crouched helplessly chained, there, in one corner of Sarker's cavernous mountain hideout. My life wasn't worth the cinders in a discarded rocket-tube. But I wasn't scared.

No, I'm not such a brave space-copper at all. I was just too damnably and feverishly triumphant to feel fear.

You see it was I, Slade Herrodd, who'd just found Sarker's cave. Assigned to the ground-scouting detail, I'd been slinking through those dark, wooded uplands, looking for some sign of him. Just a couple of minutes ago, I'd glimpsed a tiny gleam of light in the gloom of three a. m. It had betrayed Sarker's lair, blasted out of the solid rock.

Rashly I'd hoped to sneak up on him, and get the drop on him first—being twenty-two, personal glory appeals to me. But Sarker, that black-souled demon of space, guilty of most every crime listed in the code-books of nine

"It's no use," the scientist said. "Disintegrating rays are useless"

R. Fuqua

planets, possessed one of the fastest pistol-draws in the Solar System. So he had me there, now, as helpless as a fly on a pin.

It didn't make so much difference, though, as far as the success of law and order went. Sarker's goose was still cooked. You see, police tactics nowdays are perfectly coordinated. They work like the finest instrument ever made. There are space-patrols, each unit assigned to its special zone. There are atmospheric rocket-planes, and ground troopers. All in communication with one another, by radio.

We'd rounded up Sarker's gang, and chased Sarker himself out of his last stronghold in the Asteroid Belt. We'd herded him toward Earth, knowing every second where he was; for the rockets of his ship, burning their atomic fuels, had set up a certain pattern of radioactive disturbances in the ether, just as every set of rockets does. Since no set can be made exactly the same as another in its metallic crystallizations, even in assembly-line production, there is always a faint difference that identifies each ship. As if they had fingerprints. Delicate instruments, and direction and distance finders, do the trick.

We'd herded Clay Sarker to Earth, and to the Ozarks. There we'd lost him in a dense fog that he'd somehow contrived to create artificially, just as his rockets had been shut off for a landing, and could no longer guide us. Oh, he had plenty of science himself to use against us—as long as Kotah was his captive and slave. Don't doubt that!

But now, after months of searching this wooded wilderness, we had him completely cornered at last. You see, before I'd stuck my nose recklessly into mortal danger, I'd sent out a call with the little radio at my belt, telling my pals exactly where Sarker's den, that I'd spotted, was.

I FACED him across that glassy, rock-walled cavern. Well, Sarker," I challenged, feeling that I was done for anyway, "Why don't you blast me down, while you've still got the chance? Listen! You can hear the police rocket-planes coming now! I gave them your exact location. All the trickery in the universe can't save you. In two minutes you'll be a captive. In a week you'll be kicking your life out at the end of a rope. Go on and fire!"

No wonder I wasn't scared as I hissed my defiance at that ugly, scarred, thin-lipped face, with its perverted intellectual cast. Sarker was crouching like a cornered reptile against the wall, his knuckles white around the butt of his heat-weapon, that he held trained straight at my heart. In the eerie, bluish glow of the illuminators he'd strung overhead here in his apparatus-cluttered cavern, he looked like the trapped spirit of every evil he and his cutthroats had committed, from the mere looting of ships in space and the murder of their crews, to the destruction of whole cities that had failed to buy him off under the threat of bombing and heat-blasting from the void.

It was good to be part of his downfall. Even death didn't seem such an awful price to pay, as those police craft roared nearer.

But the outlaw took his time before he spoke. "Okay, copper," he said at last. "*Maybe* you win. I know I'm in a spot. But of course we haven't wasted the time we've spent in hiding here in the Ozarks. Have we, Kotah?" For a second a mocking, vicious smile lingered on Sarker's cruel lips, as he glanced toward the captive Venusian scientist.

Kotah only whimpered inarticulately, gazing at me with a tortured pleading

in his great, limpid eyes. Born in one of the swamp cities of Venus, this tiny pale-skinned man with the marks of many beatings showing on his torso above his tattered loincloth, was still one of the most brilliant individuals in the explored void. But it was almost a year, now, since Sarker's crowd had kidnaped him from an Earth-Mars liner. A gentle little member of a gentle, birdlike race, he'd been forced to work and invent for his devilish overlord.

Suddenly I felt the danger of the unknown here in this weird cave. Finally I really noticed the strange vats and grids and other nameless, wonderful apparati before me. And there were greyish metal plates along the walls. These must be the screens, the shields that had kept the etheric disturbances of the subatomic processes which must have been going on here, from being picked up by our detectors. Without them, we would have found Sarker promptly.

Yes, the danger of the unknown. Kotah's genius, plus Sarker's will and Sarker's whip. What had been the result? The growl of nearing police-rockets was thunderous now, and reassuring. But maybe we wouldn't win after all! Maybe Sarker had a secret-weapon—a means of killing my friends, and a means of escape!

THE outlaw edged across the room, still keeping his heat-pistol fixed on me. He approached a simple object, which stood in an odd, tremendously massive frame. It was an egg-shaped shell, a little taller than a man. It's dazzling lustre was more than mirror-like. A small slide-door was open in its flank. Within I could see regulation air-purifier packs, familiar boxes of concentrated rations, and a few books. That was all.

Sarker lifted his feet backwards, one and then the other, through the opening in that huge, shiny capsule. He entered the latter this way so that he could keep facing me with his pistol. At last he drew his whole body inside the shell. He'd disarmed me before, of course; but he knew that I'd try to jump him anyhow, if he gave me half a chance.

Next, with only his face, and the fist which held the weapon, showing, he fired. Not at me, but at the maze of apparatus in the cave. In a moment, under that inconceivable blast of heat, all their mighty secrets were hidden, in meaningless pools and lumps of molten metal, wreathed with smoke.

Kotah was caught in the path of the pistol, and burned in two.

Sarker made a slight, mocking gesture toward me with his other hand. It was like a wave of farewell. In his fingers he clutched a small object, the like of which I'd never seen before, though it resembled a familiar kind of cutting tool.

"So long, copper," he said quietly. "No, I'm not going to run away. This shell isn't a space ship or time-machine. And unfortunately I haven't anything to wipe out the Interplanetary Police Force with. From now on, just as you said, I'm in the hands of the law. Though maybe somebody's going to laugh loud and long—in two months. . . ."

I didn't know, then, what he was talking about. And I couldn't understand either why that fiend, Sarker, had let me live. He managed a cryptic grin. Then the door began to slide shut, with an eerie sort of heavy slowness, even though it was so small.

JUST as it closed tight, the rocket-glare of the first police ships, landing just outside, stabbed brilliantly into the cave. Trees, rough ground, and

other obstructions, don't mean much these days, for air and space craft descend gradually and almost vertically, supported by their howling underjets.

Panting with excitement, I leaped across the chamber toward what was left of Kotah. Though frail in appearance, cold-blooded Venusians have a turtle-like vitality.. Though he was halved by a heat-beam, the upper part of Kotah was still a little bit alive, believe it or not. Sarker must have figured that he'd killed him instantly, shutting his mouth against tale-telling forever. But he hadn't—quite.

Kotah's great eyes were glazing fast, as I bent over him. The last dregs of breath sighed between his teeth. But somehow—who knows how—he found the will and the strength to speak, and from the shadows of his death-blurred mind, the intelligence to direct his words:

"Bad. . . . The end. . . . You see. . . . Clay Sarker. . . ."

A few broken, English words, twittered like the notes of a tired bird. Nothing more. The tiny wizard, from an always mystic Sunward world, stiffened and departed, the remainder of his message halted forever on his elfin lips.

A second later I was surrounded by a score of Interplanetary Police. The lights had gone out with the destruction of the machinery here, but molten metal wreckage radiated adequate illumination. Even the ugly heat-guns held by those green-clad confreres of mine, looked eager to help make one of the worst devils of all history a harmless prisoner.

Commander George Harlow pushed past the other men and faced me, his sharp beard bristling. "Where is he, Herrodd?" he demanded grimly. "You radioed that Sarker was here, but I don't see him."

I pointed across the cave to that ovaform shell, which reflected with such strange brilliance the fading glow of Kotah's fused and ruined equipment.

"Inside that thing, sir," I said as calmly as I could.

COMMANDER HARLOW is more than sixty, shrewd, good-natured, hard-bitten; but like most men of his kind, slightly literal in the way he interprets what he observes. But he was keen enough to sense the suspicions and confusions in my tone. His heavy brows went together in a puzzled frown as he approached the gleaming shell, examining it warily.

But its gigantic steel supports were firmly imbedded in the stone floor. Plainly it wasn't likely to vanish before our eyes.

"So Sarker's crawled into a hole at last, eh?" Harlow chuckled. "Well, that's almost pathetic—something like trying to elude us by hiding under the bed. A final, feeble gesture. The metal this shell is made of is new to me, but I don't care how tough and refractory it is! Don't you worry, Herrodd. We'll burn Sarker out of there in a hurry!"

Our chief swung around then, like a big dynamic grizzly bear, and growled a couple of swift orders: "Lee and Edwards, you pick up what's left of Kotah, the Venusian. And handle him with respect—that's the most we can do for the poor little guy, now. Sparks! You go and radio Headquarters in Chicago. Tell them what everybody in the world wants to hear—that we've caught Clay Sarker at last! The rest of you men stand by while I work on this shell with a heat-gun!"

There was a brisk, burst of "Yes, sirs," followed by quick assured obedience. I suppose the efficiency of the Interplanetary Police was very appar-

ent, then. But I had seen more than the other fellows present, and in consequence I had certain doubtful suspicions. I wanted to warn Harlow about them; but I didn't know quite what to say, and I couldn't see any difference in outcome anyway, even if I spoke.

Harlow unholstered his heat-pistol. He turned an adjustment screw on it, so that the beam of energy it emitted would be needle-thin—a tremendously concentrated cutting point. For use as a tool, the weapon was fitted with a small collapsible shield, to protect the operator's eyes, face, and body.

Our chief chose the door of Sarker's glittering refuge as his point of attack. Maybe it looked comparatively fragile to him.

But immediately things didn't go so well. That thread of speeding heat-waves, which would have cut the toughest steel as though it were so much air, broke into a reflected sunburst against that strangely burnished metal, when it should have gouged deeply, at once. But for the shield on the heat-gun, Harlow, and many of us others, would have been instantly burned to cinders by those bouncing, scattering rays. As it was, the refractory substance of the little screen whitened with heat, and droplets of molten stone fell from the cavern's ceiling.

HARLOW'S face grew grimmer with consternation. The rest of us watched, breathless and silent, while he readjusted the weapon again, reducing its energy output somewhat. Then, gingerly, and with more caution than before, he held that needle of energy to the door of Sarker's shell again. For a sweltering five minutes, he kept it fixed on the same spot. Then he shut the weapon off, to examine the results of his efforts.

Well, we all remained speechless. It was all too plain that that shining surface had resisted completely the most powerful cutting force that we knew anything about.

There wasn't the slightest trace of a mark on that nameless, mirror-like substance, where the heat-gun had gnawed so industriously. There was not even a red-hot area, as there surely should have been. Sarker's shell had refused to absorb any of the weapon's energy. Reflection had been all but a hundred percent.

Almost lugubrious with frustration and disbelief, Harlow stepped back. But at last he grinned a little wearily, showing that he's a good sport. Next he picked up a long rib of steel—an unfused fragment of the marvelous maze of apparatus that Sarker had wrecked here.

Thus armed, our chief brough all of his considerable strength into play, thrusting that heavy piece of metal against the door of the outlaw's refuge, like a battering ram.

In one way, the result wasn't spectacular. There was a long, dull ringing, like that of a tuning fork. The queer part was that the sound seemed to come *entirely* from that piece of a girder in Harlow's grasp. That huge, weird capsule against which it was hurled, didn't even give back the ghost of a thud, from the blow! Not, of course, because it was soft like a pillow, but for an almost unbelievable opposite reason!

"Good glory!" Harlow croaked, not sounding like his usual assured self. "This stuff's so damned hard and rigid, that it can't even vibrate enough to produce audible sonic waves!"

But he tried ramming the entrance of that big egg-shaped thing again, and after he got tired, as many of us could clutch the bar at once, gave him a hand.

The futility of our added strength, though, was entirely beyond denial. One man or a dozen, it made not the slightest difference.

After a few minutes we all stood there panting and baffled. Several of us, including myself, bent down to examine that small sliding door—mostly for dents which we knew we wouldn't find.

Presently, however, we noticed something else. That little panel, as I knew, had originally been designed to move—in opening and closing—into and out of a slot hidden in the ovoid's curved flanks. But now something had changed. There was no crevice anymore, between the panel itself and the overlapping door-frame. At first I couldn't understand, but finally I got it.

"Our luck is still bad, Chief," I said as calmly as I could. "Sarker didn't feel satisfied with just locking us outside of his refuge. He must have arranged some kind of metallic cement in the slide-track of this entrance port. The cement seems to have solidified, now. A sort of new heatless welding, doubtless designed by Kotah. . . ."

HARLOW was chewing his lips in a passion of bafflement, as he bent down to look, too. Yet though he may be a little premature in his judgments sometimes, he isn't the kind of stuffed shirt that gets sore when somebody else points out facts to him. Commander Harlow depends on bulldog grit—not bluff.

"Then the door," he said slowly, "is probably just as firm as the rest of this thing. The whole business is joined together, now, in one continuous piece—solid as hell. I guess the stuff this turtle-skin of Sarker's is made of, could only be one thing, huh?"

Yep, we Interplanetary Police have to study our lessons when we go to school. Quite often, in the whirl of a battle or a capture, we forget what we've learned; but when we're stumped and stalemated, most of it comes back.

Sure. We all knew what this substance—or at least the basic part of it, that gave it its heroic properties—was, now. There was only one kind of material that could be that tough, and that resistent to all energy.

Lieutenant Norson, and Hayes and Jax, a couple of young fellows like myself, croaked out the single word in a kind of straggling chorus: "Neutronium! . . . ."

Uttering a term like that, to us—to whom scientific wonders aren't such mysteries—is like uttering the name of some lost and all-powerful legend, among savages. For centuries men have known what neutronium is—in theory. Not in a class with other elements, at all. Not a material made of atoms, around whose nuclei orbital electrons whirl in empty space as wide, relatively, as the orbits of the planets. But a substance composed of neutrons—each an electron and proton combined, to form a compact, spaceless unit of matter and mass! And each neutron touching its immediate companions. Rigid, closed files. Not a scattered skirmish line, but an impenetrable, microcosmic phalanx! Substance compressed to the ultimate of possibility, in density and strength!*

Frank Jax was the one who spoke first, now. He was the kid of our group, being nineteen. But he likes his textbooks pretty well, and he's got most

* That is what pure neutronium is. Neutronium, the Star Metal, scarcely more than a hypothetical myth for hundreds of years. An echo from the dwarf suns of terrific mass, far out in the interstellar void. Up to now, even great Earthly scientists had known of this Hercules of all elements only as a minute fraction, hidden in a black powder of baser substances which they scraped from their transmutation furnaces.—Ed.

of the rules of physics down pat.

"The metal this shell of Sarker's is made of, couldn't be *pure* neutroium," he said unsteadily, awe blanching most of the pinkness out of his cheeks. "If it were, it would be so heavy that it would probably sink right down through all the rocks and everything, to the center of the Earth. It must be an alloy of the Star Metal. But even at that, I'll bet a year's pay that Sarker's capsule, here, weighs a hundred thousand tons, though it's only seven feet high! Look at the base it rests on—massive enough to hold up a mountain. . . . "

"Uhuh," I agreed, nodding. "Kotah found a way to transmute lesser substances here, into the real McCoy, on a practical scale. Moreover, somehow, he was able to work his alloy—fashion it into shape—inconceivably hard though it is. Well, Kotah's dead, now; and inside the shell he made is our arch-outlaw, apparently trying to pull some kind of gag on us. What would you call it exactly? Passive resistance?"

Yes, Clay Sarker's motive was shaping up dimly in our minds. But we were still somewhat confused. We didn't grasp all of his scheme, yet.

JUST about when I finished my little spiel, three men in civilian garb, entered the cave. Newscast reporters, I figured.

But Commander Harlow wouldn't talk to them. He had too many troubles of his own, to bother. I could see that he was somewhate doubtful and worried, but he tried to put up an optimistic front.

"So Sarker wants to sit this one out, does he?" he growled with Satanic humor. "Well, maybe that isn't such a bad idea, even from our angle. Solitary confinement in a heat-proof, sound-proof, police-proof cell, made according to his own specifications! What a beautiful life! And when he does come out, after his food is used up—if he *has* a way of coming out—we'll nab him!"

Chief's grim humor would have been good—except that we all sensed some missing, unpleasant factor. Our bad-man wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of sealing himself in an impenetrable shell, if he expected the police to get him in the end. He must have a loophole somewhere! As it developed, that loophole was about to be revealed.

One of the civilians who had just entered the cave, spoke up. He had a ratty, wrinkled sort of face, and a smooth way of talking.

"Commander Harlow," he said. "I came here, not be ignored, but to remind you of a very important fact. Even the accused have rights. To avoid the injustice of long pre-judiciary imprisonment, interplanetary law states firmly that a prisoner must be brought to trial and either condemned or acquitted within a period of sixty Terrestrial days after capture. Failure of judicial authorities to carry out this law, sets the accused at liberty, at the end of the specified time. Do you understand me, Commander Harlow? I am Fred Bixby, Clay Sarker's attorney. . . . "

Harlow controlled his anger, and took a moment to think carefully before he responded. "Isn't it evident to you, sir," he said at last in a calm tone, "that we haven't caught Clay Sarker yet?"

Bixby fairly leaped at this quiet question with all the dramatic force and accuracy of the shrewd shyster he was. "That, Commander Harlow," he sapped gleefully, "is a point-blank contradiction of truth! Thirty-one minutes ago, you officially reported Sarker's capture to Police Headquarters in Chicago, by radio. Rocketing here immediately from Oklahoma City in the interests of

my client, I even heard the report being made public on the general broadcast. The whole world is now my witness of truth! Clay Sarker is now *legally* your prisoner! But I warn you, Commander Harlow, that if my client is not tried entirely within his rights, and within the sixty days set forth in the codes, he shall then be free and unaccused!"

Sure! I saw practically all of the whole magnificient setup, now. Before we could try Sarker, we'd have to get him out of his neutron shell. How could he appear in court otherwise—to be questioned and to answer, according to rigid legal principles? Certainly he couldn't do so from inside a tremendous casing, which not even the faintest whisper of sound could penetrate!

NEUTRONIUM! The word itself suggested an invincible barrier. Then, there was that technicality of the law, in which we were caught. Changes in legal codes are hard to make, and require much time and effort. And Bixby, who must have been in on Sarker's scheme for months, had come here, now, to do what he could to weaken our confidence, and to spoil what slender chances we had of finally bringing a blackguard to justice.

With a poisonous politeness, he said goodbye to Commander Harlow, and stalked out of the cave. A moment later his rocket-plane roared away into the night. But we all knew that the vaunted, efficient Interplanetary Police Force, of which we were members, had taken a heavy blow below the belt.

Harlow, though, is certainly no quitter. At first he looked licked, his old body sagging. "It seemed so sure—that we had Sarker trapped," he muttered. "Just a metal shell—how was I to know that it would be so tough to break into? I got excited, and I underestimated Sarker's scientific tricks. I reported his capture prematurely, like an old fool. I guess he must have figured I'd do that. But even if I hadn't, I suppose Bixby would have cooked up a good court argument to prove that Sarker was our prisoner, as long as we had him in the shell. . . . "

Yes, Harlow seemed defeated, but with a surge of bulldog courage, he straightened abruptly. "Listen, you newscasts reporters," he barked suddenly to our visitors—the two who had arrived at the same time as Bixby. "You can make public anything you like. But make this fact public too! We've still got sixty days to really catch and fix this yellow, murdering rat, Sarker. We'll call in the best scientists. We'll grab him out of his star metal joke-box yet! . . . "

Joke-box! It was a perfect name for that huge, glittering, unassailable egg. Somewhere in my thoughts, Clay Sarker seemed to laugh "loud and long," as he had promised.

The next few days were full of just the kind of fight that Harlow had predicted—except that hoped-for results were scant. Arthur Ellwyn and Olive Baker, and several other metallurgical experts, were enlisted to help solve our problem. First they tried to examine Kotah's apparatus there in the cave. But Sarker had ruined it all, completely. The ponderous secrets of the vats, that had made and shaped neutronium alloy, and hence might dissolve it too, had died with the tiny Venusian.

So we had to fall back on more primitive agents. Atomic explosive, the most potent of these, proved no good at all, as we suspected, even before we experimented with it in tiny quantities. We couldn't drill any sort of hole in the neutron shell, in which to place a charge, and of course against those rounded surfaces, it exploded uselessly —and nearly brought down the cavern

roof. Which obviously we didn't want.

ACID was utterly futile too. Heat, in its most violent form, we'd already tried, when Harlow had used his pistol against the shell. The tight-packed structure of that hellish metal seemed to reflect all energy. Maybe it is impossible for pure neutronium to have a true temperature—for heat is a vibration, and even this diluted alloy, firm and utterly rigid, seemed to resist all vibration completely.

One of the scientists—Baker, it was—even suggested a mighty press, a sort of titanic nut-cracker, in which to crush Sarker's refuge and bring him out. But of course the press would have to be made of steel. And steel, in relation to neutronium, is more tenuous and feeble than air in relation to the toughest metals we could produce.

"Sarker had a special tool, when he went into the shell," I told the others. "Something I suppose Kotah made for him, to cut his way out with, in the end, if we failed. I saw that tool. If we only had it, now!"

"Wishes don't do any good, young fellow," Art Ellwyn, the big metallurgist, commented. "We've tried just about everything, now. There's just one hope left. A gigantic, power-driven grinding wheel, not using futile diamond-dust as an abrasive, but a certain black powder from the transmutation furnaces. A minute part of it is neutronium—as pure a form of that devil-stuff as our science has yet achieved."

Ellwyn's grinding wheel was set up right there in Sarker's cavern. It was much easier to do this than to try to move a hundred thousand tons of ungraspably compact mass—in short, Sarker's joke-box, to some other, otherwise more convenient place.

Pressing against the shell, the big wheel began to spin, driven by its atomic motors. It was neutronium scraping against neutronium now. Maybe there was a chance.

Twelve hours later the machinery was stopped, for an examination of its effects. Where the wheel had been grinding for so long, against the joke-box, there was a pathetic little flattened area, marked with parallel scratches.

"The process is working," Ellwyn said. "But it's terribly gradual. I wonder if we can hope for it to cut through the shell, even in two months? Just a tantalizing possibility, maybe."

Commander Harlow, some of the other boys, and I, took a day off, and went to New York. There was no use for us to hang around Sarker's cave. In New York, in the Space Institute, there was a small, golden casket, fairly drowned in flowers. Kotah, the tiny Venusian wizard, was lying there in state. Earth was paying him a last tribute, before they sent him back to his torrid, rainy planet, for the mysterious funeral rites of his gentle people. Kotah, perhaps the greatest scientific genius that the Solar System has ever known.

I TELL you, seeing that casket there really got me. It made me remember too much, and reminded me of too much injustice and too much horror. Those cities that had flamed and died under Sarker's bombs. And Kotah's marvelous discoveries, perverted now to criminal use—Clay Sarker sitting safe inside his neutron sphere, reading books, chuckling to himself. He wouldn't mind two months of loneliness and silence, for he was a space man—and that's the way you often have to live, in a rocket-ship out in the void.

If his scheme worked, he'd be free—free to laugh at the law he'd tricked, free to begin a new series of piracies and murders! I found the thought

fairly maddening. And Sarker hadn't killed me, when he'd had the drop on me with his heat-pistol. Maybe he'd figured that his mocking laughter, after sixty days, would be more painful to me, and more satisfying to himself, than my death! His was about the grimmest, most ironic jest that the Sun had ever looked upon.

Commander Harlow, standing at attention there beside me, as I gazed at Kotah's bier, must have been thinking much the same things that I was thinking. For suddenly he began to speak, almost to himself.

"The legislators are so slow," he muttered. "So tangled up in red tape. They can't be made to realize. The change in the law we've applied for can never be made in two months. And if Sarker is set at liberty, the chances are he'll be a far greater menace than before. For he knows some of Kotah's science, now—enough, maybe, to make deadly weapons, the like of which we've never seen. . . . ."

I also felt that vague fear. "Then there's only one thing for us to do, Chief," I whispered. "If the abrasive wheel doesn't cut Sarker out of his refuge soon enough, we've got to shoot him down ourselves when he does emerge."

I, a sergeant of Interplanetary Police, spoke thus to a commander—shamelessly. But then, conditions justified murder as a last resort.

Harlow answered me without surprise, and without shame. "It would be all but impossible to accomplish, Herrodd," he said bitterly. "Bixby, Sarkers' attorney, will simply hire a plentiful guard of armed men to protect his client. Sarker, being in recognized danger of assassination, will have a perfect right to an escort. Even we would be examined for pistols."

And there Harlow and I had to leave the situation stand.

THE hours went by, and the weeks. The neutronium content of the abrasive on the great grinding wheel continued its tedious work gnawing at Sarker's joke box. But it became more and more apparent that the process was too gradual. The fiftieth and the fifty-ninth days came and went; still the master of all criminals was beyond our reach, and beyond trial.

On the night of the sixtieth day, Bixby, the lawyer, and thirty men with heat-guns, took over at the cave. "You're shift's finished, Harlow," Bixby said mockingly. "You and your boys can go home now, if you want to. Clay Sarker is out of your control. But we'll keep your grinder running. It may help my client to get out of the shell. . . . ."

All of us police left, lost in black thoughts. But Chief Harlow, and Ellwyn, the big metallurgist, and I, came back on the morning of the sixty-third day. The radio had reported that the wheel had almost scraped through the neutronium alloy of the joke box. In Chicago, New York, London—everywhere—people were waiting restlessly and angrily for more news. One of the luridest, most sensational justice-evasion stories in the whole history of criminology, was about to come to a head.

Harlow, Ellwyn, and myself, arrived at the cave together. Chief and I struggled to keep up good fronts, showing the world that Interplanetary Police weren't yellow, even in the face of defeat. I guess even those hard guards of Bixby's appreciated our defiance, though they tossed a few cut-and-dried wise-cracks at us, as they searched us for weapons.

For more than an hour we all watched that rotating wheel. Then there was a queer little plop, and a

puff of steamy vapor. When the grinding apparatus was swung aside on its supports, a ragged-hole, about six inches across, was revealed there in the flank of the neutron shell.

It was a strange, tense moment, as everyone present there in the cave, waited to hear Clay Sarker utter his first triumphant words, from the small opening that had required more than two months to cut.

But the silence persisted as the seconds clicked by. There was only a faint wisp of steam rising from that opening, like vapor issuing from an unstoppered thermos-bottle. Through the cavern extended a gruesome, fetid smell. Something, somewhere, was wrong.

AT last Bixby edged toward the sphere, and peered inside, with a flashlight. Visibly his face greyed with horror. "Oh Gawd!" he rasped. Then he looked around wildly. His stricken gaze came to rest on Ellwyn, our scientific companion. "Come here, Mr. Ellwyn," he grated. "You know all about physics and things. Maybe you can explain this. Sarker should have been—absolutely safe. . . . "

We followed the metallurgist—Harlow and I. We got our glimpse through that jagged hole, too. The interior of the neutron shell was hot and steaming—like the inside of some huge pressure cooker. Crumpled at its bottom was Sarker's body—reddened like a boiled lobster's. In his dead right hand, outflung, was that little tool of Kotah's, meant, as I had guessed, to cut neutronium alloy. There were marks on the steamy inner walls of the shell, where Sarker had evidently tried to use it, to get free from his self-ordered prison.

Suddenly I began to feel very sick. "Did the tool—somehow—cause his death—do you think?" I rasped at Ellwyn.

Reaching into the joke box with one arm, Ellwyn had pulled the object clear—holding it in a handkerchief, for it was uncomfortably hot. Now he examined it, pressing a small button on its side. From its muzzle it ejected a steady stream of electric-like flame. Experimentally, Ellwyn held the latter against the joke box. After maybe three minutes, tiny flakes of neutronium alloy began to chip away from the latter. The scientist shrugged, shutting the tool off.

"It generates considerable heat," he said. "and undoubtedly contributed some to Sarker's bad luck. But that isn't the real point, here. I think I understand, now."

"Then tell us about it!" Harlow urged.

"Okay," Ellwyn began in a low tone. "This neutron shell, as we all found out, was impenetrable to all ordinary forms of energy, from the outside. Sarker knew that, and banked on it for his own safety. But he forgot that it would be just as impervious to energy—*generated on the inside!* A living human body produces and radiates a lot of calories of heat. That heat couldn't escape; it stayed inside the joke box, piling up as the weeks passed, creating a higher and higher temperature! Clay Sarker must have died one of the most horrible deaths imaginable—stifling and slow. Of course people can endure a pretty high temperature—far above normal blood-heat — because they sweat, cooled by evaporation. But that only made Sarker's torture more graudual and more terrible. Obviously he used this cutting-tool of Kotah's every once in a while—but as I've said, it generates plenty of heat, too, and even *its* action was slow against the neutronium alloy! Feeling the rapidly increasing temperature, every time he tried the thing out, Sarker must always

have desisted, in panic. Until he finally passed out. . . ."

ELLWYN'S voice was a hoarse, awed croak at the end. I guess we all felt queer. Clay Sarker had deserved hell all right—and had got it.

"He didn't know," Bixby rasped. "His scientific knowledge wasn't extensive enough for him to realize that he was in a trap. Stewed in his own body-heat. . . .

Harlow nodded. "Kotah the wizard certainly knew, though," he said simply.

Yes, Kotah had known, all right! "Bad. . . . The end. . . . You see . . ." had been his dying words. Bad for Clay Sarker, he'd meant. Venusians are gentle and innoxious—but give them sufficient reason and their justice becomes fiendish. And so the man who had committed so many horrible crimes, had met his fate.

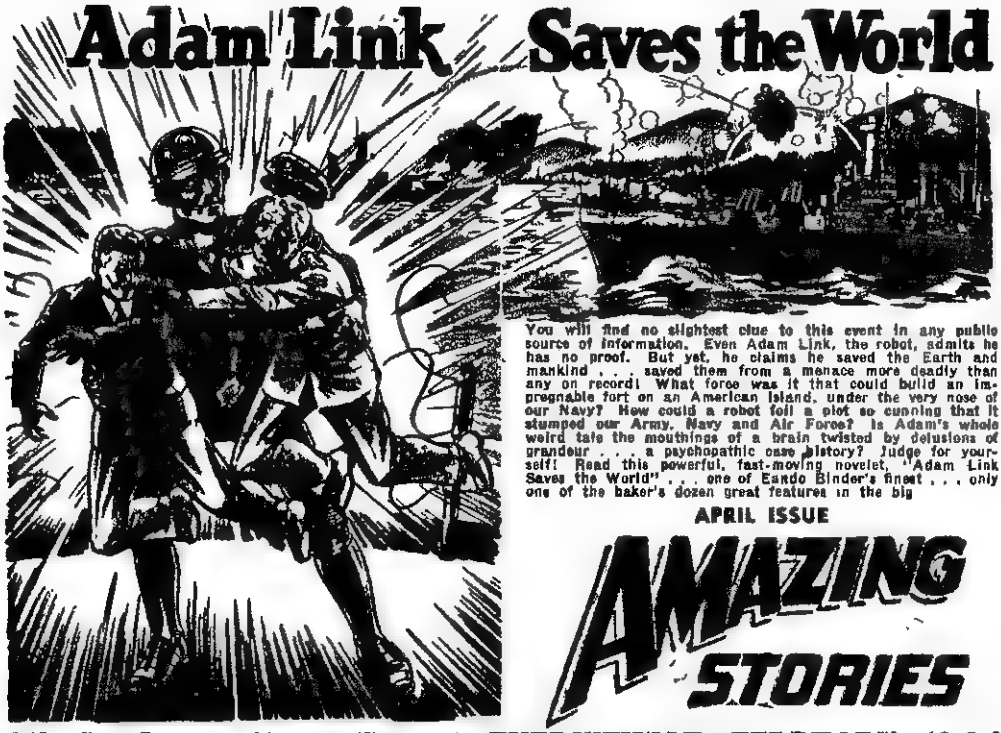
Harlow and I left the cavern of death together. "Lucky for me and Bixby, and those guards in there, that things turned out the way they did," I said.

"What do you mean, Herrodd?"

"I couldn't have gotten into the cave with a pistol," I replied. "The guards would have found it when they searched me. But that didn't prevent me from filling the hollows inside my shoe-heels with a lot of small atomic grenades. Had Sarker emerged from the shell alive, I would have somehow chased you and Ellwyn out of the cavern. Then I would have stamped my feet, and blown Sarker and everybody connected with him, sky high."

"And yourself, also," Chief commented, grinning. "Herrodd, you and I are a couple of frustrated heroes. I wonder how we happened to think up the same idea, separately?"

Dumbfounded, I saw that he was walking very lightly, and that his heels seemed a trifle high. . . .



You will find no slightest clue to this event in any public source of information. Even Adam Link, the robot, admits he has no proof. But yet, he claims he saved the Earth and mankind . . . saved them from a menace more deadly than any on record! What force was it that could build an impregnable fort on an American island, under the very nose of our Navy? How could a robot foil a plot so cunning that it stumped our Army, Navy and Air Force? Is Adam's whole weird tale the mouthings of a brain twisted by delusions of grandeur . . . a psychopathic case history? Judge for yourself! Read this powerful, fast-moving novelet, "Adam Link Saves the World" . . . one of Eando Binder's finest . . . only one of the baker's dozen great features in the big

APRIL ISSUE

AMAZING STORIES

ON SALE AT NEWSSTANDS EVERYWHERE FEBRUARY 10th!

(Concluded from page 6)

NO DOUBT you've noticed that this is another big issue. Well, your editor has just hit a streak of enthusiasm, and he simply can't contain himself. So there's no telling when we'll quit having special issues. But who's kicking? Not you readers, certainly. Hope you like our wacky book. Confidentially, we even sneak it home ourselves and read it!

IN THIS issue we have the long awaited serial by Don Wilcox. "Disciples of Destiny," will run in two parts; two socking 30,000 word instalments that ought to sizzle the ears off you. It's something that Don has worked on a long time, and we held many discussions about it while under construction, and drank many a gallon of coffee thrashing out tough points. And in spite of it all, Don has written a fine story. But he certainly got around all our clever suggestions without ruining it! We're sure you'll like everything he's done in this one.

ROBERT FUQUA did the cover for the story, and he certainly did a grand job. His gadgets, his planes, his castles, *everything!* is good. And once more he demonstrates his right to the title "Master of the Gadget." If anything about the story could raise a doubt in your mind, a glance at the scene on the cover will put you straight. We're almost tempted to ask Fuqua to show us the photograph from which he took the painting! It's that real.

HAVE you glanced at the line-up of writers in this big March issue? If you haven't you ought to. Because even your editor has never seen a pulp magazine with that galaxy of stars! Edgar Rice Burroughs, the grand old master of them all; Don Wilcox, the brightest new star of them all; David V. Reed, whose first story was an instant success, and who has never failed to ring the bell since; Edmond Hamilton—old "world-wrecker" Hamilton, who has been writing science fiction since we were knee-high; Raymond Z. Gallun, the "idea" man for many years (his biography is on page 229 together with a photo); Manly Wade Wellman of "chrysanthemum Martian" fame; and Jep Powell, who once laughed when the Prince of Wales fell off his horse! Tie that, if you can!

EDMOND HAMILTON isn't wrecking worlds this time, though. He's indulging in a little humor, at our expense. But we can take it, can't we? Science fiction readers, contrary to the opinion of the "experts," can take a joke on themselves, and don't take themselves so seriously that they can't see the humorous side of science fiction. In fact, in recent years, Amazing Stories has presented a good many humor yarns that have figuratively brought the house down. So, let's laugh with Edmond Hamilton, and bide our chance to get back at him—and remember all the time that Ed's a crackerjack writer, and his next story, a long novel, will wallop you right between the eyes. We know—because we've just read it!

WITH our back cover this month, we present the next to the last in the series "Cities On Other Worlds." We present the city on Earth as the Martians might imagine it. Next month we'll give you the future city on Earth as we might imagine it. Then, following that, we have a brand new series by an artist we predict will shock you right out of your seats with his ability. He's Jim Settles, and don't you forget that name. You'll be screaming for his originals to hang in your den. Maybe we'll have a contest . . .

SPEAKING of contests, next month we've got a new brain-teaser for you. Miles Shelton has written a story called "The Perfect Trap," and in it his hero is really in a pickle! The idea is for you readers to get him out. Frankly, we can't. And we'll give away $50.00 for a solution. You've heard of the writer who finally killed his hero because he had him in such a jam he couldn't end the story? Well, you wouldn't want Shelton to do that, would you? It isn't cricket to kill the hero, although sometimes we'd like to!

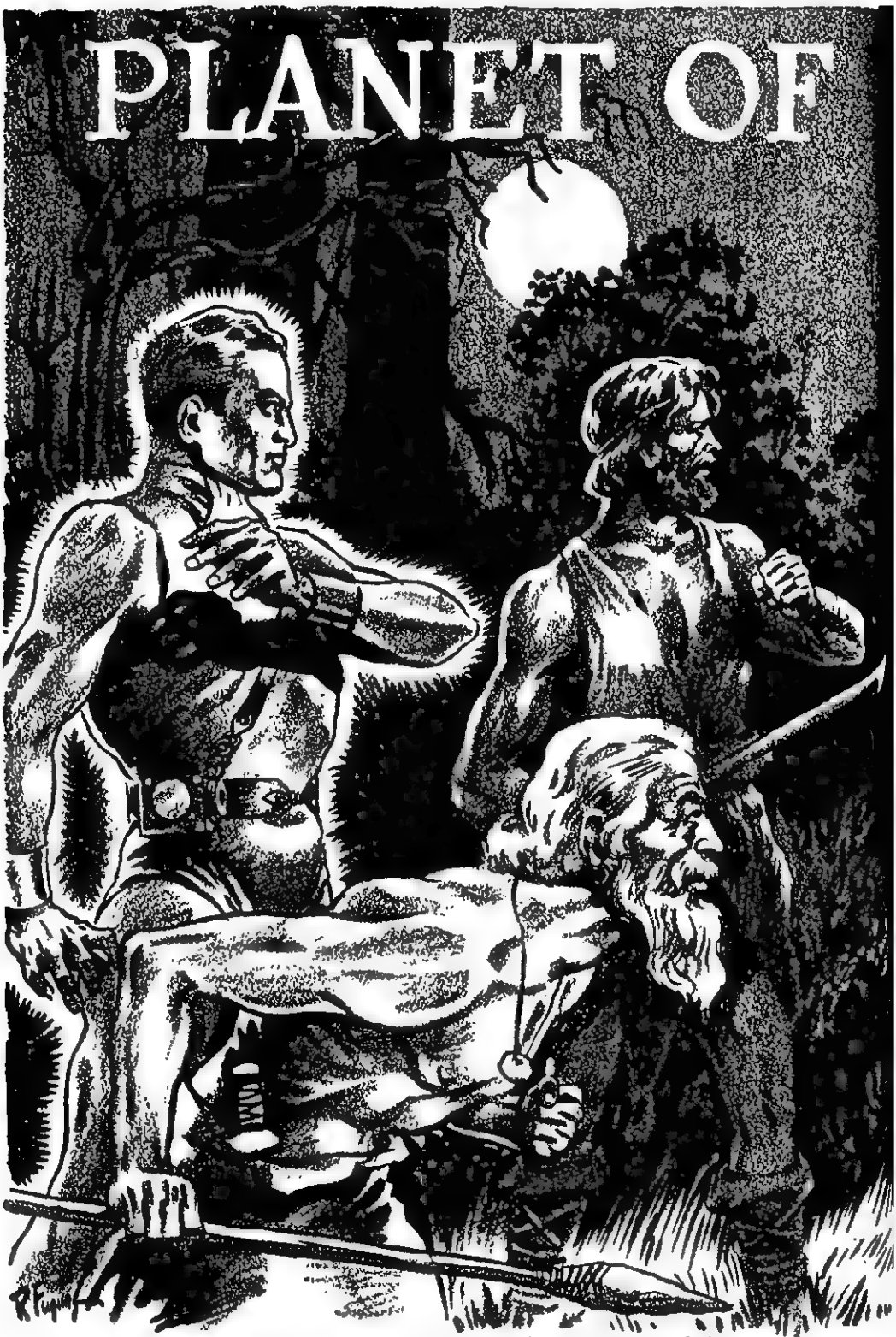
OUR cover next month is also by Robert Fuqua, and it illustrates Eando Binder's latest Adam Link story "Adam Link Saves The World." It is a fine piece of work, and the Adam Link opus is Binder's best about the metal man since "I, Robot."

DON HARGREAVES comes back too, with another of his adventures in Mars. Festus Pragnell still continues to bat 'em out in London, in spite of the war. This time Don goes to Deimos, one of the tiny moons of Mars.

MALCOLM SMITH returns to the cover of Amazing Stories in the May issue with "The Avengers" written by William P. McGivern, which is the most timely story of the new phase of the war we've seen to date. It depicts the *end* of the present war, and the revenge that all of us are now working for—and the peace that is behind our vengeance.

And with that sincere statement, we leave you for this month. Keep your eyes on the Japs—you don't want to miss it when they go *pop!*

Pop.



Chill horror coursed through the three as weird shapes swept toward them

By DAVID V. REED

What was the undead secret of this awful world of ghosts who switched men's souls?

THE *Flambeau* had stopped. An infinitesimal speck in the measureless void that lies between the worlds that make a universe, it moved like driftwood on a placid sea—a man-made hulk of pale carmine metal hanging in space. Somewhere in the midst of a million miles of darkness it had stopped. The *Flambeau*, pride of the Luxury Fleet of Spaceways, Inc., *was beyond human control.*

In the pitch black of the ether, warm amber light streamed from its thousand portholes like lingering iridescence from the belly of a dying deep-sea fish. Motionless in the sub-frigidity of space, it was a brilliant, beautiful, lifeless thing, its flashing motion halted—a coffin caught between worlds.

Around the navigation desks, the officers of the watch still sat, staring ahead. The Captain lay slumped over his dull metal desk as if he had fallen asleep. In the corridors men and women lay sprawled; the cabins of three decks were filled with humans.

Some of them still sat easily as if they were reading; only the books had in some instances fallen to the floor. There were others half-dressed, lying as if some horrible fatigue had come over them while they were dressing for evening—the arbitrary evening of the eternal night of space, dictated by a clock. The lounge was an immense chamber of silence, its numerous occupants stiff and

grotesque, and the third deck, where a late tea had been in progress, as was the custom of Britons, was still spread for tea. People sat around the little tables as if they were waiting . . . waiting perpetually . . .

The quiet lay over everything as in a sepulchre, the simultaneous tomb of hundreds, where the lifeless silence lay like a tangible thing. And yet there came a sound, a faint sound!

Dr. Kimball Crane could hear his breath rasping. Air was moving from his lungs, and the sound was raw and uneven. He lay for a time with his head cradled in his arms, slumped against the white surgical table in the *Flambeau's* hospital, remembering. His dark eyes moved slowly over the littered room, seeing the bandages, the overturned bottles, the clean, glistening instruments. Wearily, his hand brushed back a dark lock of hair, and the surgeon's cap fell from his head.

He rose weakly to his feet, a tall, slender man, and moved toward the door. Methodically, from the habits of years, he paused to pick up a scalpel—and remembering how he had last used it, he threw it from him in sudden fury.

The clatter followed him through the door. He walked through the corridors trying not to look at the horrible sight that met his eyes, up through the lounge while his steps rang loud and hollow, past the Captain's quarters, up again to the first deck. His step had slowed when he slid open the door to the Communications Cabin.

As he looked about the wrecked interior he fought against despair. He poked his feet about in the mass of torn and broken machinery, and then he was on hands and knees, finding bits of several instruments—etherphones, visiscopes. He was the only man left alive on the *Flambeau*.

Through the long hours which followed as he worked, oblivious to hunger or fatigue, one thought obsessed him. He had no way of knowing where the ship was, and no goal to try to reach with his messages if he ever got them out, but he knew he had to warn others —warn them of what he had seen.

Once or twice he clicked out a trial short-range call, waiting for an answer that might come before he undertook to waste all of the little power he had in one long call.

It was hopeless; he knew that. The automaton sender, the tiny mechanism sealed by the Interplanetary Military Commission, which gave out the secret registry number of the *Flambeau*, had been destroyed. The registry call could not be duplicated by hand. Too well had they provided against counterfeiting registry. Without the identifying call number, anything he sent after that would be disregarded. There were too many ruses current in these troubled days . . .

But he clung to his hope. He was lost without it. Perhaps with it. He worked over the bits of machines, piecing them together, nursing them, determined to gather enough power for his one effort.

Then, smashing in every crude switch, throwing every last atom of power into his crippled apparatus, he called toward home, calling a number that blazed in his mind. In the deathly stillness the machine whirred and groaned, and the clicks of the sender were sharp little taps of a hammer.

Kimball Crane calling.

He had worked it out so many times in his mind. The machine might go dead at any instant. Whatever got through had to tell a story.

Flambeau lost. Attacked by—

The hand that slid over Crane's was

strong. It gripped his fingers and tore them away from the machine.

AROUND the great spaceports of Earth, where the immense charred pits and fields ended, far from the resplendant halls of the terminals, stood the little neat houses run by the Planeteer's Foundation. They were like a tiny fringe clinging to the edge of the only world that meant anything to them — the world of other worlds. There the remnants of man's conquest of space lingered.

Day after day, sitting in the sun, were the men who had once roamed the spaceways. Many of them were old, others were scarred and maimed, but in all of them, even in the most bent and broken of these sailors of the sky, there were evidences of a dignity and belief in themselves and in what had been their calling.

In clear weather they sat and talked, pausing to identify a faint glimmer in the heavens that was a spaceship returning home. Or on foggy days they listened for the burning song of a vessel as it came swinging in through the atmosphere, its hull glowing with heat, a vague luminescence through the mist. It gave them the only peace they knew to sit there and remember.

But sometimes the talk would turn to other things. Sometimes they spoke of the things which only Planeteers knew, odd sights they had seen, of the distant wilds to which they had been. And of the legends. For in their time, in the year 2770, when man had been traveling through space for more than four centuries, there were these legends and stories and tales stranger than the imagination. A thousand years before them, earthbound men who sailed the earthbound seas had had their sagas and their legends. Planeteers had theirs.

And what were these legends but nonsense? Any scholarly lad fresh from his extra-territorial geography class could testify to that, or any intelligent layman. There were many people who had sailed millions of miles through the void. As veterans (they always assured one they were veterans) they would hardly pause before they laughed and embarked on a short, pithy discourse on superstition. Nonsense!

And for years the Planeteers had said nothing. To them, jealous as they were of their domain, tired from years of fighting the treacherous, savage void, perhaps they preferred to keep it to themselves.

Then startling things had begun to happen. People didn't like to think about them. But you just couldn't dismiss the vanishing of two space liners on a single day; you had to think about them, because maybe a man you knew had had his family on one of the missing vessels, and it might as easily have been your family.

At first they had blamed these mishaps—totally inexplicable—on the law of averages, on confused theories about cosmic storms, on the usual culprit, the law of probabilities. You could look through the pages of history and find plenty of parallels. Ships had always been lost, and probably always would be, humans being fallible creatures. They were tragedies, doubtless, but what could one do? Not what the alarmists said.

You couldn't cut down on the number of ships; the average lost would be the same. And a highly developed interplanetary commerce had made the Earth as dependent on its colonies as the colonies were on Earth. And one had to remember that scattered throughout the universe were millions of beings whom one could call Earthmen only by courtesy. They had been

born for generations away from Earth, had lived and died there. They were dependent on Earth for steady supplies, almost all of them even for oxygen to release in their thin atmospheres. Man was the only intelligent life in the universe. Give up his domain?

Hell, no. That was just silly. Who thought of it first, anyhow?

BUT time had passed, and a decade had rolled on since that day when two ships had disappeared on the same day. There had been a brief flurry when some scientist, a Sir Basil Something, had said he discovered both ships had passed a given point and then had been heard from no more. After the flurry, Sir Basil was heard from no more.

Then, in January, 2770, a freighter had come into port towering behind it the scarred and battered hull of the *Sybarite*. The *Sybarite* had disappeared three years before. That wasn't what had caused the sensation. It was just that this was the first anyone heard of the *Sybarite* having disappeared in the first place!

Who had hushed it up? How in the world could you hush up a thing like that in this day and age? They had a series of investigations, there were a series of resignations, and somebody laid the blame on inefficiency.

But who was to blame for a certain ship that was even then plowing the ether on its regular run, and named, by happy coincidence, *Sybarite?* Quite a coincidence, too. The ship on the run was an exact duplicate of the missing ship that had turned up! A duplicate! What were they hiding, this nebulous "they" with which the ordinary man referred to those who ran his government?

Scandal somewhere. Illegitimate dealings in contraband, in forbidden drugs. Somebody owned up to it, paid a heavy fine and ended the matter.

A week later there was a fresh sensation. The *City of York* came in to dock with only two fuelers aboard. The rest of the crew and the passengers were gone! And the fuelers were stark, staring mad. They had brought the ship in somehow, by instinct, by some remarkable stroke of luck. But where were the others?

That brought up the *Sybarite* again. There hadn't been anyone aboard her either. Where were they?

The net effect of all this was to bring up the story of Peter Haymes again. He had written about things like this in a book, and the book had sold less than a hundred copies. Of those hundred copies, you couldn't get a single book dealer to own up possessing even one. Laughed right off the market.

The story wasn't funny, however. Peter Haymes had been a big man, the kind they called a captain of industry, wealthy as only a merchant prince of space could be. And what had happened to him? Suicide, or so they said. No one really knew. He had been a man steeped in the cold facts of commerce, an unusual man who poured all his energy and intellect into building an empire. And for relaxation, he had endowed research laboratories, and financed explorations.

And then his young wife and two sons had vanished on the *Flutterby,* his private yacht, a dream of a spaceship They said it had driven him mad. Sometime after that—it had been in 2765—he had come out with his book, called *Inquiry.*

HAYMES had said all kinds of things in that book. He had gone into exhaustive researches, combed histories. More than that, he had gone among the men who had manned his

ships and listened to their talk. He wrote a book that was filled with tales of harpies and fiends and sirens. The sheerest nonsense. Audipress, the universal newscasting agency, used sections of it as humorous news filler. What else could one do with a man who claimed that ten times the number of ships people knew as lost had actually been lost? He told some totally new stories, the one about the *Wanderer*, for instance, a ship that had vanished and returned some twenty years before.

Haymes said that the true story had been hushed up by Military Intelligence. It had returned with all its passengers, three days late, but with some curious quirks among those passengers. They didn't know who they were, they thought they were each other. And it didn't end there. This kind of thing had been going on for a long time, for decades, he said. There were forces at work keeping people in ignorance.

The ridicule had been magnificent. It poured in on him. When he finally disappeared, his empire had tottered from neglect. The creditors and holding companies swarmed over what was left like so many maggots.

The Planeteers had said a few things, referred people to certain pages of *Inquiry*, vouched for their truth, and been laughed at. But that had been five years before, and in the five years other ships had disappeared.

If you spoke to people about it, they assumed the attitude of pioneers. Space was not yet fully conquered and accidents were bound to occur. History showed as much, even Haymes' history. But all through the Spring of 2770 the losses were appalling. Traffic fell off. The list of missing ships, never a public document, became a state secret of the first magnitude. Audipress let out some hints about the revival of piracy and the new automatic registry sender was introduced. The restlessness was increasing, but it was kept undercover.

Here and there a person confessed curiosity about Haymes' book. There were open speculations about what was really going on, because by then it was generally assumed that *something* was going on. You couldn't explain so many disappearances—and deaths—constantly increasing, even with the suspected censorship, on history, or any law . . .

IT WAS the fourth of June that Judd Rafferty got his first clue and lost it. The day was so important to him that it was understandable. On that day he had finished four years as an apprentice in cadet space patrol; he had been given his commission.

He was lieutenant Judd Rafferty of the Interplanetary Military that day, a strong, broad young man with an open, beaming face, very eager, very brave, and a trifle new around the seams. When he looked at people and smiled, with the short cropped hair rising like a thick brush from his scalp, his uniform uncreased, his boots still creaking, everyone smiled back. June fourth was his day.

But there had been other days. He was scarcely six when he had been put in a state orphanage, with a tiny bank balance marked beside his name. He was eleven when a distant relative came to sign him away to the people who wanted to bring him up as a son. That relative had told him all he knew about his parents. His father had traded in alien plants on distant worlds. When he resolved to give it up and return to his family, his wife had gone to Orion to accompany him home. They were never heard from again. Spaceways, Inc., denied they had booked passage.

From eleven he lived with Captain

Schrader and his wife. Both were elderly people and they showered him with affection. Captain Schrader, retired, had spent his life on slow rocket-barges, on tiny freighters, and in his youth, in the monetary exchange vessels that traveled in obsolete armor from colony to colony. Judd Rafferty for ten years lived with a man whose whole life had been his work, and it seemed ordained from all time that when he was old enough, he too would be a planeteer — a real planeteer, not a barge captain. At twenty-one he had entered the cadet space patrols and undertaken the four difficult years. He finished with honors.

The world had begun to smile on Judd Rafferty. He had his commission and his home, and he had his life ahead of him.

The clue came through the first day he was at his desk.

*Kmbllcrnclln*g — dash — *Flmblst* — dash—*ttckb*. It ended there. When it first spluttered weakly through his etherphone, giving no registry number, young Lieutenant Rafferty was very much excited. And then he remembered *Rules and Regulations, Section 12, Paragraph 1: Every transmission that is not preceded by a registry number is to be disregarded.* That made sense. The automaton sender never failed. Unregistered calls were for the patrol ships in the vicinity; they would track it down. The young Lieutenants had been taught that people must not be disturbed by meaningless or unauthorized calls. They spread unfounded alarm.

UNDOUBTEDLY, Lieutenant Rafferty would have obeyed regulations if the message had been less obviously cryptic. But there he was at a desk where he would spend a preliminary year. It seemed so prosaic beside the patrol work. The yearning for adventure and romance burned brightly within him. And the message seemed so simple to decode, if indeed code was what it was. He scanned it and saw there were no vowels. Easy enough. *Kmbllcrn*—that was meaningless. But *cllng*, cut off from the rest . . . could mean *calling*. What had gone before must have been a name.

It hit Rafferty that he wasn't reading a code at all. It was too easy, more like a vowel-sounder on the blink. Could it possibly have been . . . *Flmlst* . . . Suddenly he jumped to his feet and dialed in his superior on the office system.

"Lieutenant Rafferty reporting. I have received a somewhat garbled message which seems to say '*Flambeau* lost —attacked by' and then it ends."

The mustache on the superior officer twitched on the screen.

"Have you checked the registry number, Lieutenant?"

"No registry call preceded it, sir."

The mustache stopped twitching.

"Lieutenant, do you remember Section 12, Paragraph 2 of the I.M. bible?"

"Paragraph 2, sir. Yes sir."

There was a black scowl on the screen. He turned and mumbled a few words to someone out of view. The answer came back inaudibly.

"Lieutenant," the officer turned back. "Please tune your visiscope on Double L-3, 900. If that satisfies you, be so good as to report to the discipline committee. I think you ought to find out what Paragraph 2 of the Manual is all about."

"Paragraph 2, sir. Yes sir."

Rafferty had barely time to see the mustache in one final twitch when he dialed. Double L-3, 900. That was the spaceport of Great Chicago. The screen flooded with a view of scarred fields bathed in brutally clear afternoon sun. The sirens were going. Moving the scope about, Rafferty brought a

huge, pale rose ship into view. He moved in closer and saw the words *Flambeau*—Luxury Liner, etched in its hull. The under jets were counting off. The roar grew louder.

Lieutenant Rafferty softened the sound until he could hear himself swearing. He knew some picturesque oaths and he combined them all in a long and passionate string. When the afterjets began to count off, he turned off the switch.

So the clue was lost. The day remained important to the young man notwithstanding. It was a major calamity to Lieutenant Rafferty.

Yet Lieutenant Rafferty had had reason to suspect he had lost both his parents in a spaceship. He had been brought up by a man who had often told him strange tales, and he had spent many an afternoon among the Planeteers. In his mind and heart he was already a Planeteer.

The clue, nevertheless, slipped through his fingers. And that was understandable.

CHAPTER II

Death Ship

"SO YOU'VE come back!"

Dr. Kimball Crane had cried out in astonishment, but he might have cried in pain. The pressure on his own strong hands was unrelenting, crushing his fingers. The fatigue of hours was sucking insistently at his strength, and the room was moving in a slight, uneven arc; the three men before him, dim, bulky figures in heavy ether-tunics were moving with it, and the effort of thought had become too much . . .

Someone was slapping his face, and Crane knew he had fainted. An empty, folded ether-tunic was lying near him and he heard the mumbled instructions to get into it. He struggled with the heavy fibre-cloth.

When he rose, from a porthole he could see the dark, slender form of the ship that had hailed the *Flambeau* hours before. He followed the men heavily, every step difficult. There was a merciful mist before his eyes that blotted out the horror that lay on all sides.

Outside the final lock, one of the men pushed off and seemed to float down to a waiting tender. Crane followed, but there was so little strength left in him that his push didn't quite make it. He hung for a moment in free space. Will the astronomers find me, he was thinking incoherently. Maybe a liner would smash into him and spread him like a thin film over its hull. An odd death, he was thinking. Where were they taking him?

The next moment the two following men had leaped and pulled his inert form with them into the tender. It moved away slowly, propelled by short bursts of compressed air.

They were edging down the gangway when Crane realized he was on a fighting ship. Silver-duct lines to supply heat rays hung so low he had to stoop, and firing coils, and sliding metal shields. But this was no Military ship, and pirates—pirates didn't do what Crane had seen.

Then he heard it again—and he had wished never to live to hear it ever again. A low, sibilant cry that was half moan and half sigh, as if all the world had joined their voices in a great dirge and the sound had carried through all of space to penetrate to him.

There was something in the sound that was wild and yet subdued, like a wail of protest when the protest was useless. There was grief in it, a vast insane sadness. Its note vibrated in a human ear and ran through the body until the bones returned the vibration

in sympathy. There was something complete and universal in the sound, and it brought a flood of memories, unknown and unrecognizable, whirling through the brain.

Crane shook as if he had been in the throes of a violent, alien fever, and he saw the bodies of the men with him trembling. Then it was gone and they went forward again.

When they stopped again, Crane knew he was in the commanding officer's quarters. This was the chart-room, sparsely furnished, the walls covered with calculation tables, travel arcs, astronomical configuration maps. A massive burnished copper desk stood in a corner, a deep tan rug covered the floor, and there were several chairs. Crane sat in silence while the men stood quietly, emerging from their helmets, paying him no attention. Crane was grateful for the respite. He closed his eyes, trying to relax.

AFTER a time he sensed a movement in the room. He opened his eyes to see a man walk into the room. He was dressed in ordinary blue coveralls, somewhat stained by grease and open at the neck. Beyond a little red skullcap that he wore, there was no mark of authority on him, no symbol to convey rank. That stood out sharply from his manner, from his lithe step, from his deliberate wave of an arm to the men in the room. He was tall and angular, and his features were not immediately discernible because of a short, thick beard he wore, as dark as the mat of hair over his great forehead, and his eyes shone with a hard, brilliant blueness.

"Thank you," he said. The men left the room.

The bearded man sat down on one end of the desk, much as a schoolboy might, and regarded Crane.

"I hadn't thought we'd meet again, Doctor." His voice was deep, his manner informal but polite. He added, "You've put me to a great deal of trouble."

"No more than the trouble to which you put me."

"Does the knowledge that you saved my life distress you so much? It shouldn't. But for that, you might now be among the dead on the *Flambeau.*"

"You might have given me my choice."

"Unfortunately, that choice also affected my life." The bearded man smiled a bit. "Venusian swamp fever is easy to fight with the proper medicines. I am already recovered as you see. But believe me, Dr. Crane, what happened to the *Flambeau* was not in my plans when I hailed it."

"The wanton killing of hundreds by your men—"

"Please," the man interrupted. "My men did nothing. You came to the scene a bit late to discover what actually happened, but as a doctor you must have noticed—surely you noticed—something odd, shall we say, about the manner in which death came to those people. No heat incisions, no blueness of electric bolts. I am as anxious to escape notoriety at this moment as the authorities on Earth seem to be anxious to help that desire. Their adherence to an age old policy pleases me. I would not have done anything like mass murder at this time. For many reasons."

Crane said suddenly, "I know you. I've known you somewhere . . . I can't remember. But somewhere . . . if I could think."

"You see," said the other, after a momentary pause, "what a risk I run by sparing your life out of a gallant gratitude? I left you once with only a fractional chance of returning to life,

and I had hardly left when my ship picked up the experimental calls you sent. You pressed the best time from my ship, but I believe we returned in time. What went through will undoubtedly be discarded." He paused a moment. "You hardly know, Dr. Crane, the condition of Earth's interplanetary traffic, nor of the fantastic measures they have had to take in the past few years. Few men know. I find it a welcome condition."

Crane was looking at the man. There was a prominent blue vein that ran the length of his forehead. His nose was well shaped, his chin was firm. Without the beard he would have been a handsome man of some fifty years, although there was scarcely a gray hair on him. But Crane couldn't remember. Fatigue was drinking his strength. The sound of his own voice, like the other's, seemed to come from far off.

"Unrest poisons your mind, Doctor," said the man. "I will put you at ease. We of this ship are pirates—yes. But we are not the anchronistic freebooters of another age. Our prize is an exceptional one, and our equipment for the task finds no equal in man's most haunted dreams. You have fallen into the orbit of a plan, like the brief comet wasting itself, and soon you will be gone." He softened his tone, seeing the luster in Crane's eyes, knowing how tired the other was. "'If you are unfortunate, and live, you may come to see things beyond your understanding. You may come to wish that I had never spared your life."

Crane's voice was a sigh, weak and distant. "I know who . . . you are . . . Peter Haymes . . ."

WHEN Crane rose from the bed on which he had been lying, he saw by the interstellar clock that he had slept for more than twelve hours. He sat by the large amberglass porthole and looked out into the dark splendor of the universe. In outer space the starry worlds took on a new character, without the miles of dust-laden atmosphere to dim their glory, they emerged anew, often with faint colors to stud the black heavens like a handful of scattered gems.

So three days passed . . .

Sometimes Crane read from a small stack of books in his room. Sometimes he played with the music recorder. But most of the time he lay quietly in the darkness and thought. Peter Haymes . . .

He had never met him, but he had seen and heard him countless times on the visiscope: at the commencement of a college; laying the foundation for a structure; making speeches; being interviewed. He had been missing for almost five years. Where had he been all that time? What had he been doing?

Perhaps people should have guessed that he was alive, somewhere. He wasn't the kind to have bowed before adversity. Not he. All his life he had fought, within the rules and without, but savagely and well. His memory was a monument to that, in spite of the sorry ending. But it hadn't ended. Haymes had come through that horrible chapter—for it was evident now that it had been but a chapter. What would this brilliant man write into the story of his life before he was through? What next?

On the third day, Haymes came to Crane. He waved his hand in half familiarity and sat down across the room from Crane. His expression was calm and thoughtful as he lit a Mercurian cigarette and offered the luxury to his guest. Then, not until both men had exhaled the last of it did Haymes break the silence.

"You shouldn't have told me you

knew who I was," he said. "It complicates matters. Even mercy can be misguided."

"Mercy seems to play a small part in your life."

"For an excellent reason, Doctor," Haymes agreed, passively. "If you know me, you must know what I have suffered. But I can hardly expect you to understand. The men who are tied to me by the greatest of all bonds—blind loyalty—they will be repaid. The others . . ." he lit another cigarette before he completed the sentence, "... likewise repaid."

"What can you hope to accomplish alone, no matter how well armed?"

"Alone?" Haymes smiled. "Hardly. This ship is but part of my organization. There are men in my employ on Earth and on many of its colonies, some in positions that put them beyond suspicion—if, indeed, there is any suspicion."

"If your intention is to taunt me with subleties and hints," said Crane, "consider yourself a success. I haven't the vaguest idea of what you mean. But it seems to me that you are suffering from certain delusions of grandeur. As a doctor to a patient, I might say to you that these dreams of yours, obviously of revenge, can bring you nothing but further sorrow.

"You interest me, Doctor. Go on." Haymes face had grown dark. The muscles of his jaw flicked as he controlled his anger.

"I should charge you a handsome fee for this," said Crane, indulging in a smile which he knew must prove intensely irritating. "I was previously an army surgeon and had little occasion for psychiatric work. Your case history, if I may call it such, began when you lost those dearest to you. Tragic as it was, what happened to you was worse. For you lost your most prized possession—your mind. And you wandered to strange activity which could only result in merited ridicule—"

"Merited?" Haymes had jumped to his feet. He spat the word out. "I'll show you how merited it was! There—"

A soft knock on the door interrupted him. It opened and one of Haymes' men stood there. "We've entered the white area," he said.

HAYMES nodded and dismissed him. But when he turned again to Crane, he had regained his composure. The interruption had quieted him.

"You're playing a rather obvious game, Doctor," he said.

"What do you expect to gain by angering me?"

"I don't know yet," Crane replied easily. "Maybe I want a look at something I missed on the *Flambeau*. I am very much interested in that new weapon of yours."

"You almost got me to show it to you. Sorry."

Crane returned the other's pleasantry.

"There will be another time. The best thing about your kind of madness is that the ego demonstrates itself even when it knows better. You'll slip again."

Haymes was forcing himself to remain calm again.

"I'm afraid there won't be time enough to disprove you," he said. "We are nearing your last destination. Look out of the porthole."

Crane turned and stared out. He could see nothing but a blank whiteness. It had no dimensions, no depth, no form. It was as if the ship had been immersed in a sea of milk except for the fact that there was not even a suggestion of liquidity about the whiteness. A dead white—nothing more.

"Your headquarters?" said Crane.

"You might say so. Temporarily, at any rate. I expect to shift to more commodious and familiar headquarters very soon. The Earth, say."

"You sound like some sinister, if outmoded, dictator," Crane laughed. "We outgrew dictators centuries ago. You sound slightly ridiculous."

"All right, Dr. Crane." Haymes' fists were tightly clenched. "I don't know what stops me from killing you here and now—"

"Your ego," Crane smiled. "It won't let you because I'm the first fresh audience you've had in a long time. You've got to prove something to me, to show me how right you are and what a fool I am."

"Right again! Interpret this as a victory if you like. I am going to show you what a fool you are. Please follow me."

Making no attempt to hide his amusement, Crane followed Haymes out of the room and down a narrow corridor to Haymes' quarters. Playing this game of intellectual teasing was working. Where it would end was a matter of conjecture. Crane would find out what he could before he thought of any way out, if there was any way. Remembering what had happened to the *Flambeau* made his own salvation unimportant somehow. He had to get out word of Haymes, to send a warning. He was playing for that.

As if the past few moments had resulted in an inbreeding of his anger, Haymes turned to Crane with his face a dull red.

"Stand beside me, Doctor, and don't move if you value your life." He opened a drawer of his desk and took from it a small tubular object a foot in length. Then he slid out a panel board from the desk on which were rows of buttons, each marked with some section of the ship. He held his finger over one marked *C.Q.*, probably to correspond with *Captain's Quarters,* and flashed a savage grin at Crane.

"The answer to a thousand questions," he said quietly, and pressed his finger down.

THE only noticeable change was very slight, Crane thought. It had completely escaped his attention until then. The room, as the whole ship had been, was bathed in some vaguely greenish light, so slight as to be imperceptible. Crane had been too tired to notice it when he had come aboard, and probably he had grown so accustomed to the slight change that it had never occurred to him. But now, as Haymes' finger pressed down the *C.Q.* button, the green light in the room faded away and was made noticeable by its sudden absence. Immediately afterward the room was plunged into complete darkness.

Then Crane heard the moaning, heard it grow louder. In spite of his courage, his body was racked by great shudders of uncontrollable fear. It was the sound he had heard twice before, the same completely terrifying and inhuman cry that had driven him almost insane.

Through the walls there slowly coalesced the first of three figures—moving through solid substance and coming toward them. They were perhaps three feet high—but they were transparent, ghostlike, fragile as the figures in a dream, with half their outlines obliterated and the rest like grayish, gold-flecked smoke against the black of darkness.

Crane knew then the utter agony of pure fear, felt it bursting his heart, in the hammers that were pounding in his temples, in the hot bath of his

sweat. Some power that was not his own kept his consciousness when he pleaded for oblivion, some strength held him on his feet when he knew he could no longer endure.

Closer and closer the figures came, wheeling about in a circular motion, and Crane imagined he saw traceries of features on them. Closer and closer still— And then something beside Crane lit up in the darkness, a thin beam of light, pale green, like a bright knife cutting its way through the dark. It stabbed each of the three figures quickly.

The next moment the wailing reached a crescendo—and the figures suddenly fled!

The cylinder in Haymes' hand, its light faintly illumining his tightly clenched fingers, went dark. A switch clicked into position and the room lit up. The figures were gone; the sounds had ended.

Crane stumbled to a chair and flung himself into it. Haymes stood near him.

"Have I satisfied you?" he asked, softly. "Do my words still sound empty to you? That was what you missed on the *Flambeau*—the death of your fellow passengers at the hands of . . . my weapon. And the answer, the only defense? Locked in here." He returned the cylinder to his desk. "And in here." He pointed to his temples. "A pirate with imagination and ambition enough could take the world with it."

"What was it?" Crane found it difficult to speak.

Haymes shrugged.

"Diagnose that answer, if you can."

"What do you intend to do with it . . . them?"

"Them is correct, Doctor. There were several hundred clustered about my ship when I hailed the *Flambeau* for your serum. I intended using them on worthy game, say, military ships. Unfortunately they got out of hand and you saw the result. They were all—how shall I put it—used up? That's as good an answer as any. So I had to return here for more. You might call this their home. Shall we . . . ah . . . call them ghosts?"

Kimball Crane sat quietly. In his experience he had heard other men speak as Haymes was speaking. Perhaps it was the suffering that had taken its toll. He had heard the evidence once in a stifled sob when Haymes had mentioned his bitterness. But this was no mere madman. There was a deadly undercurrent in him. Peter Haymes was a hideously warped man inside; there were scars deep inside him that had never healed, etched in an acid that had tortured him and eaten into his being. Now, bemused, he looked at Crane and spoke again.

"You may be interested, Dr. Crane, to know the fate I have stored for you. The destination I spoke of, meaning yours, and the home of these, ah ghosts, are really the same place. They come from a planet above which we happen now to be. You, Doctor, are going to live on that planet!"

IF Haymes had expected any overt reaction from Crane, he was disappointed. Crane didn't move a muscle. The reaction was all inside him. He knew now that his own life was ended. There was something he had to do before he was through. He was even then scanning the wall charts, and his eyes were fixed on one of them that had a trail of pins marked on it, pins that started with the location, the last location, of the *Flambeau*, and continuing in a bright line toward . . . nowhere. The last pin marked a spot in space.

If, as in all interplanetary ships, the charts were marked from hour to hour, then they were now nowhere at all. Yet Haymes was saying something quite different. Crane looked down along the sides of the chart, to the guide lines, memorizing their tale. To what end, he told himself, looking at the silent Haymes again.

"Thank you for the entertainment," Crane said presently. "And now, if you don't mind, shall we be going?"

"Afraid you'll be late?" said Haymes, leading the way out. "I didn't make any appointment for you."

"My only regret," said Crane, following Haymes down the corridor, wondering at the prodigious strength of the ship as its armaments revealed, "is at having to call on these strangers without a shave."

The light pat of their footsteps on the metal floor punctuated the conversation as they moved to the aft of the ship. At the end of the corridor, at their approach a large circular door slid open to admit them. Two of the crew were inside, and Crane saw that they had come to a combination storeroom and shell chamber. There were half a dozen of the collapsible, one man shells in which gunners could go out alone to circle their prey like deadly gnats, and Haymes pointed to one of these.

"Guns out, sir," said one of the men. "Two cartridges of compressed air loaded. Ready to go this minute."

Haymes turned to Crane.

"That's for you, you know. I'm sorry we won't be able to escort you all the way."

Crane nodded absently. Two cartridges of compressed air would give the tiny shell about two hours of motive power, and for two hours he could wander about in space, in that strange whiteness outside. But he was more concerned with other things he saw. There were fully twenty 12-inch heat-bore guns, many others of smaller bore, insulated battle armor, electric bolt rifles, hand weapons. Overhead were fixed life boats, cables for towing back spent shells. And there were two etherphones . . .

"Any last request?" said Haymes. "I like formalities."

"Got any cigarettes?"

"Certainly." From his tunic, Haymes withdrew his box of cigarettes and handed them over. "Anything else?"

Crane had dropped the box. In stooping to retrieve it he accidentally kicked it away, and he went after it. When he rose again, his hand had reached out and seized one of the hand weapons. He wheeled and faced the men with the heat pistol in his hand.

"Just thought of it," he said, quietly. "There's someone I'd like to ask to take care of my canaries. Pick up one of those etherphones!"

"WHERE do you think this is going to get you?" Haymes countered. "The only men aboard who didn't carry sidearms are in this room, because we didn't like the idea of you snatching one of them. But there are guns enough outside to fry you to a turn."

"You aren't outside. You're here with me, and I'm quite willing to fry you before the chef reaches me."

Haymes lowered one of his raised hands to stifle a yawn.

"An interesting notion," he said. "Call me in the morning."

"Pick up that etherphone!" said Crane. "You've got half a minute."

Fifteen seconds went by before Haymes spoke.

"Crane, you can't operate that phone and keep us covered at the same time. You can't shoot us because you don't know where the outlet for the phone is.

And none of us are going to send out your damned message and be shot down a minute later. You can kill me, all right, but what of my organization? There are men who know almost as much as I know. They'll take over."

Part of that, at least, was true. The worst that could happen to Haymes was his own death; it would be the end of the universe for him. But that would scarcely be any comfort to Crane, if it was true that he had an organization. If the thought of death terrified Haymes still he would not send out a message knowing that the same death awaited him. There was no time; someone might come up at any moment. And there was a warning that had to be sent . . .

"You know I'm right," said Haymes. "I'll make a bargain with you. I want your word that if we send your message, you'll not harm us."

"You have my word. Get the etherphone."

Crane kept his eyes fixed on the man who lifted the heavy instrument, watching him set it on the floor. He moved aside two crates and lifted a ring. Underneath lay the glistening red glass of the outlet. The man plugged in the etherphone and he sat down beside it.

"Rattle it," said Crane.

The hammer tripped off tic-tic-tic. It was in order.

"Adjust it to 2,000 revs. Right. Signal the number I.M. 50. Right. Now take this. 'Dr. Kimball Crane calling. I am the only survivor of the *Flambeau* which was attacked in space by the pirate craft of Peter Haymes. He is alive and has new and dangerous weapons at his disposal. I am calling from his craft, position approximately J-J 54, point 55.03, point 7. I am about to be marooned here. Warn all Military ships. That is all.' "

CRANE watched the corners of Haymes mouth curl up.

"What about registry?" said Haymes. "What do you think they'll do about a call without a registry number?"

"Send it again," said Crane to the crew man. "I'm listening and I know the code. Send it again."

But the repeat was barely started when a voice piped through the intership communications horn.

"Shell room. Observation calling. Engine room reports ship idling. Have you fired the shell?"

Crane moved his gun.

"Tell him it's going off in a minute."

Haymes moved to the mouthpiece of the horn, switched it in.

"Any minute now." He paused for an instant, then added, "Order all hands to guns. Get ready for a cover-all broadside." He switched off and turned back to Crane. "We're going to make it interesting for you to get away," he smiled. "That heat gun makes you a dangerous man."

Crane hardly heard him, intent as he was on listening to the ether-phone ticking off the message . . .

Presently Crane looked up.

"All right, now. Stand back against the wall." The three men retreated to the door. With one hand Crane pushed back the catches on the shell. A swift glance through a porthole disclosed nothing but the whiteness, that queer, uncanny white. Silently he donned the head mask that lay nearby, tested the oxygen discharge. The controls were set, the shell was on its stays, the fuse was a long, ugly black string. He kneeled beside it and bit it in half with his teeth.

A risky business, that short fuse, but no more risky than waiting for it to go off while Haymes and his two crew men were there to stop it. As if there was

any difference in dying aboard the ship or outside.

He slid into the seat of the shell backward. With a sudden motion he flipped on a torch against the fuse and whipped the cover down on the shell.

Almost instantaneously there was a crashing in his ears, a lurch that tore at his viscera. He was free of the ship!

Swiftly he slid back the amberglass visor in the cover of the shell and looked out. The white had become greyish, undulating shapes, like masses of huge clouds, or like steam that had been made into a more stable almost viscous, form.

Waiting for the first crackling, hissing sound of the plates when the black ship would fire, Crane sat tense at the controls, keeping a perfectly straight course.

A straight course where?

His journey to nowhere had begun.

CHAPTER III

Disclosure

LIEUTENANT Rafferty had been disciplined. He had sat quietly before the military commission and listened to Captain Andrews, he of the twitching mustache.

"I find, Lieutenant," the Captain had said, "that you have a penchant for melodrama and adventure, and that you are determined to hunt it right at your own desk. You can't sit still, Lieutenant. Ants in your pants, or too many vitamins in your breakfast. So we're going to cure you. Military Intelligence has been short handed all year, and has requested us to transfer suitable officers. We consider you a first class rocket bomb, and accordingly find you suitable for service with the M.I. staff. Effective immediately."

New as he was in the service, Judd Rafferty hardly appreciated the sarcasm in Captain Andrew's words. Interplanetary Military Intelligence, the I.M.I., or M.I., was a burial ground no matter how it was abbreviated; the final resting place of officers who played the wrong politics. One could easily understand this. The function of M.I. was to listen, sort and record grievances of passengers in interplanetary traffic, adjust the petty quarrels of shippers, arrange schedules, and carry on the office routine incident to police work on mandated planets and colonies. The M.I. was nursemaid to the problems of commerce.

But Lieutenant Rafferty reacted strangely. He was certain he would find fascination in the work that left others weary with boredom. Man had found no other intelligent life in the universe, but man had so much variation within himself, that, added to generations of breeding and living on distant worlds, he had peopled the universe with new beings. Rafferty had met many of these people before, when as a boy in his teens, they had come to visit his guardian, Captain Schrader. Then they had captured his heart and mind and imagination. He had spoken to people who had never seen the Earth before, whose forefathers had been born on distant stars, and he had listened to the tales they had poured out.

It was to the unending line of these people that Rafferty now looked forward to meeting again. For some reason, the tales he had heard from them, and the stories of the Planeteers, when of an afternoon he and the Captain had walked among them—all these things were suddenly, constantly on his mind. He wanted to hear how other people spoke again. He remembered that they had seemed to act differently—to think differently; their minds, like the minds

of all people reared in semi-civilized habitats, seemed childlike and poetic and free in many ways. They spoke of strange forms of life, of inexplicable happenings . . .

NOT even the first day at his post discouraged him. A foppish and lackadaisical Major had lectured several new men on their duties. The main thing was discipline. They were to listen to people and have the entire interviews recorded on dictascopes, an apparatus which took down conversations and photographed those concerned in them, all on tiny rolls of film. These film records and accompanying sound tracks were each day to be given to the officers from the files.

That was all. With the recording, duty ended. But the Major took it upon himself to supplement the lecture with a few side remarks. He had spun a little swagger stick in his hands and said.

"You will notice there is no compulsion to take these matters seriously. Quite the other way, in fact. M.I. expects all of you to keep a sense of balance, even a sense of the ridiculous, you might say. It won't do to keep flying off the handle about everything you hear. And you will find that among experienced M.I. men, most of what you will hear are classified as 'screwball sagas.'"

The Major had snickered, and the new men snickered with him. All except Rafferty. Curiously enough, the speech had a chastening effect on him, and it left him rather subdued. Which may have been intended.

But whatever malign and relentless fate was pursuing Lieutenant Rafferty —if indeed it was not merely his childishness dignified with another name—that fate was not to be put off. Having begun by putting Rafferty under disciplinary restraint on his first day of duty in the corps, it marked time briefly and catapulted him into another situation from which there was no retreat.

It was three days after he had taken up his new post that Rafferty listened to a man from New Pleiptes. He was a tanned, weatherbeaten planter, and in his direct manner, he told of how he had ordered machines months before, and how they had come late. And again he had ordered several motor plows and received a promise that they would arrive on time.

"Had two hundred men waitin' for the stuff," he complained angrily, "an' I find out a couple of days ago that they'll be three weeks late. What the hell is going on around here?"

"This is hardly a matter for the M.I.," said Rafferty. "It seems to me that you have an insurance claim for delay against the liner."

"Damned right I have!" the planter had spluttered. "And they paid off fast. They always pay fast. But I want an explanation. I tried to talk about it to the Spaceways people and they shut me up. All they said was, 'What ship was it, please?' and when I answered, 'The *Flambeau,*' they signed my claim."

"Did you say *Flambeau?*" said Rafferty. "When was this?"

"Last few days. The *Flambeau* was supposed to pick up the plows at Church's planet, where they'd been sent before. Instead I'm goin' to get 'em on a direct shipment from Chicago."

"On what vessel?"

"The *Flambeau,* o' course."

"Of course."

THE matter ended there officially. Lieutenant Rafferty called Spaceways and found that the *Flambeau* had reported in early, and as a consequence, its schedule had been altered. Rafferty

soothed the planter diplomatically. And when he was through, he sat back and wondered who in hell was going to soothe him. Because he needed soothing, because he was powerless to check the absolutely insane, weird thoughts he was thinking.

Or perhaps it was that young Rafferty had been caught in a swift, tragic swirl of events that carried him helpless in a raging tide. The events make the man as much as men make events. It took the quick — inordinately quick —juxtaposition of connected events and the peculiar man that Rafferty was, considering his temperament and background, to make him do what he did that day.

It was then the end of a Friday, when things were at odds because of the impending week-end. One of the M. I. officers from the filing vaults had come through, steering the huge, portable wagon-cases in which all new records were taken up before they were finally added to the old batch. When Rafferty first looked up, there was a case standing near his desk. It was unattended.

That was enough to arouse his curiosity, for from what he had seen of the cases, they were never left alone even for an instant. Headquarters seemed to prize those cases. And this particular case had been the subject of several conversations that afternoon—rather excited ones, with men running around and whispering and acting important.

It seemed an odd way to act about records that no one gave a hang about when they were being gathered by junior officers. Especially when one remembered that the same man never took the same case twice in succession, and that inside the vaults there were other switches of men, and the actual filing, they said, was finally done by ranking officers.

But there it was alone, after all that silly confusion. And it did not occur to Rafferty at first that he was interested. He was just standing there, running his hands idly over the containers. There were innumerable small metal boxes in the case, each holding a thousand or so feet of film record. But suddenly, he caught himself.

He had been playing, unconsciously certainly, with the shelf marked "F", and he had seen where his interview with the planter had been placed. But well to the rear of it, deep inside the case, there was a long, flat box marked, "Unregistered Calls." That was what stopped him short...

He had surmised, of course, that some sort of record had to be kept even of those calls, but now as he thought about it, he wondered at the special attention given to messages that M. I. was officially supposed to ignore. Why should they be preserved?

Was there perhaps a record of the call that had come to him four days before—the call that had disciplined him right out of ship-contact calls to Intelligence work? And why keep ship-contact calls with the dictascope records? What connection could there be between them?

Almost inadvertently he had been taking the box from the case—then all at once he knew what he was going to do. He opened the box, took out the film roll and placed it in his own dictascope, then released the switch that allowed the playback to operate.

THERE was a soft tic-tic-tic as the machine began, and then the voice. Etherphones, the only means of communication in space, sent only letters in signal codes, but here they had been transposed and were enunciated either as letters or as whole words. The code

letters impinged on the Stewart diaphragm, and it transposed it vocally.

Kmbllcrnclling — dash — Flmblst — dash — ttckb. That was what Rafferty heard. So they had really preserved the call. It didn't make sense. The voice came on, enunciating the date on which the message had been received. Rafferty leaned over to turn off the switch, when he heard the tic-tic-tic again. Was it going to repeat?

But the next moment Rafferty's hair was trying to stand on end as he listened. There was a numbness all through him.

Dr. Kimball Crane calling. I am the only survivor of the Flambeau which was attacked in space by the pirate craft of Peter Haymes. He is alive and has new and dangerous weapons at his disposal. I am calling from his craft, position approximately J-J 54, point 55.03, point 7. I am about to be marooned here. Warn all Military ships. That is all.

The thin, ticking noise followed briefly, then the voice added: *Unregistered call received at ship-contact post. York Headquarters of Interplanetary Military, June 8, 2770. 4:21 P. M. End.*

How long he sat there, slumped in his seat and unable to move, Judd Rafferty had no way of knowing; all he remembered later was that things had been going on inside him, half-thoughts flashing by, innumerable vague ideas like images from the distant past, and they were tearing him apart. Over and over there was a little crazy refrain in his head. It kept making *Kmbllcrnclling* mean something. *Kimball Crane,* it kept singing...

There was a hand on his shoulder, gripping him fiercely. Behind Rafferty stood a burly Lieutenant—the officer in charge of the violated filing case!

"Get away from that desk!" he shouted to Rafferty.

His fist had come up about half-way when Rafferty caught him. There was no rage in Rafferty. There was unfinished business that he had to attend. His actions were almost methodical, in spite of his swiftness. He caught the other's arm and twisted, and there had scarcely been a cry of pain when Rafferty's blow smashed into the other's face. The officer went down in a heap and lay there.

Rafferty's voice was thin as he spoke into the visiscope.

"Central Hospitals? Lieutenant Rafferty. Official business, Military Intelligence. Please check on a Dr. Kimball Crane. His last movements."

An interminable half minute went by. Then—

"Dr. Crane left Earth on January 12, aboard the *Firefly.* He was due back June sometime — hold on — this week, aboard the *Flambeau,* having reported his intention of returning in an official capacity. There is a blank here to indicate that he has not yet reported. There seems to be... A notation came in some hours ago. Dr. Crane is reported engaged in special field work outside communications range in an infected area. Is there anything else?"

"No," said Rafferty. "Thank you." It added up...it kept adding up.

And then Rafferty saw for the first time that the officer who had been on the floor wasn't there! He had sneaked out silently. It was a matter of minutes now. Less. He could hear the intra-office sirens going on. There was nothing to do but wait...

COMMANDER Scott leaned back in his chair and opened his snuff box. The little black flakes of dust had left their mark on the white gloves on his hands. Slowly his hand brought the snuff up to his nose. It was a long,

slender nose, cruel looking. Everything about the Commander was cruel looking. His face was thin and dark as a hawk's, his short wiry body seemed stooped and crooked, his sparse hair covered a large, irregular skull. And the gloves, unblemished white save for the snuff marks, snapping imperious fingers, concealing the iron hand of Scott that was dreaded throughout the service.

"You've had quite a day, Lieutenant," said Scott. "Why won't you tell me about it?" His milky grey eyes were piercing as his fingers drummed on the table. "What have you found out?" he said. And all at once he smashed a hand down and shouted, "Answer me, Lieutenant!"

"There's nothing to answer." Judd Rafferty sounded weary. He had been waiting for hours for Commander Scott. He had expected court martial and drumming out; instead he had waited until Scott came, and now the two of them sat quite alone in his chambers. Outside the night had fallen, and from nearby the brilliant beacons of the spaceport flashed in the sky like pale, searching fingers. "It isn't that I don't want to tell you," Rafferty added. "It's just that I don't know what I know."

Commander Scott turned away.

"Go on," he said.

"I can't go on. I don't know anything. The service has fixed things so that we can't know anything. All we can do is think—those of us who have things to think about, and there aren't many." He paused, and suddenly the words poured out of him. "When I first got that message from Dr. Crane, I thought it meant something. It looked like a vowel sounder out of commission. The same thing that ruined the vowel sounder could have ruined the automaton registry sender, even though we were told the senders never fail. Then Captain Andrews showed me the *Flambeau* at the spaceport in Chicago. That stopped me...then."

"Indeed?" Quietly. Then Scott said, "Say it, Lieutenant."

It was as if Scott had been waiting for him, knowing what he had to say, and waiting.

"I'll say it." Rafferty's voice was even. "I think the ship I saw in Chicago was a double for the *Flambeau!* I think there have been other ships with doubles..." His voice trailed off.

THE room was a silent island in the midst of an ocean of noise. Rafferty could hear the noise outside, beating like waves on a beach, moving in the streets below, carrying life past him. But here there was nothing. He and Scott alone. And the silence, thin as a thread lost in infinity, stretching away beyond knowledge.

Presently Scott leaned forward in his chair, and held his hands out to Rafferty.

"Look at my hands, Lieutenant!" His voice was soft now, but under it Rafferty could feel the heat of emotion. "I wear gloves to hide the ghastly scars on them. There are scars one can hide more easily, yet wear less comfortably."

He sank back to his seat and breathed slowly. When he spoke again, it was without visible effort, as if he were reminiscing out loud.

"When I was your age, I was mate on a small mail tender. I got the scars on that tender's last voyage, escaping in a lifeboat. I had to get out so fast my hands stuck in one of the locks. But the records say I wasn't aboard on that voyage. The records say I was behind in the hospital because of acid

burns on both hands. And the records say the tender continued in service. Or, as you say—*its double*. Because I saw that ship lose every man aboard, and go hurtling down to the surface of some obscure planet. The crew? Supposedly dispersed throughout the merchant marine; a new crew was aboard on the next trip. Check on them if you can get the records. The insurance was paid in time, on those who had people to claim it. That was a long time after it all happened."

"You mean—" Judd Rafferty said, incredulously.

"I mean there are things we don't talk about!"

Scott's face was drained of color as he rose and walked to a window.

"I learned not to talk when I came back. I joined the service, and on the first of these little stars on my uniform —one for each year in the I. M.— there was a little field of red. Have you ever seen those stars, Lieutenant, and wondered why that red field was worn by some men? *It indicates the year in which the man had to be told.* And now you must be told. There are few men with the red field, scarcely any with the field on the first star. Your background, perhaps, or imagination, circumstances..."

The Commander waved an arm as he dismissed the possibilities. He came back to his desk.

"Lieutenant, rumors are seldom dangerous—as long as they stay rumors. If your knowledge were common, our liners would gather dust in the spaceports. Our people scattered throughout the universe might be cut off from each other. Those who live by our supplies would die horrible deaths. Our interplanetary intercourse, on which so much of our own life depends, would be at an end."

Slowly Rafferty asked, "What is there doing this to us? What enemy have we, what force?"

Scott laughed shortly and dryly.

"Our secret archives record these things for a century and a half. What is there, Lieutenant? No one knows. So no one must ask. But we've kept forging ahead, because we have to! Because we fear that if we stop going out to meet this unknown danger—it may come down to meet us!"

"But the message," said Rafferty. "It involved Peter Haymes."

"Haymes hasn't been alive for one hundred and fifty years," said Scott. "So that even if we are willing to believe that he is alive now, and that he let a prisoner use his etherphone for some reason, how would that explain the things that happened so long ago? No, the answer lies elsewhere. We have drawn charts and diagrams by the thousand. One thing we know. The catastrophes have been occurring closer to Earth, and they have been multiplying so quickly that it is only a matter of time until the general public finds out that thousands are missing — in these past few months alone. The day they find out will be a sad day indeed. And it is against that day that our elaborate secrecy is directed.

"We have been taking our chances, employing doubles, giving them unregistered call phones, listening to their reports. Nothing has come of it. So we keep on. Those we lose are involuntary sacrifices for the safety and security of the rest of the world, and the other worlds. Inhuman? But how else can we find out who our enemy is —or what it is? We must find out, not here but in space, and we must fight it in space, away from our loved ones. Or else we may all perish. But until we know—silence!"

"The Planeteers talk of things..." Rafferty began.

"We know them all. They crowd our records. But we must laugh at those who get too many notions, unless we can give them a red field around their service stars. We must sneer! But the *Flambeau,* like the many who went before it, like my little mail tender, has not been forgotten. And though we make rules to preserve secrecy, we cannot forget. Here—"

THE Commander bent over a visiscope and tuned. The large wall screen behind him lit up, then abruptly blacked out. A military official appeared on the screen; he saluted and faded. In his place rose one of the interiors of Central Hospitals, and the screen took in a sweep of corridors and moved toward a guarded series of doors. Here again the visiscope was challenged and passed, and on the screen appeared the inside of an enormous chamber, which for all its size, was carefully secreted.

There were triplex arrangements of rooms within, and dozens of people moving about, or sitting with doctors speaking to them. The visiscope moved closer, toward a small group. A short blond man was saying,

"I'm James Harvey. This fellow is Harry Parks. Have you got it straight now?"

"But your passports say you are Parks and he is Harvey," said the Doctor, gently. "The photographs bear out this contention."

The man beside the short one spoke up.

"He's crazy, Doc. He must have switched the photographs with somebody. Probably a crook. And I wish you'd stop humoring him by calling me Harvey. Donald Ferris is a good enough name for me. I never saw this guy before."

The doctor shook his head. From a pocket he withdrew a hand mirror and showed it to the man who had spoken last. Bit by bit, as the man gazed into the mirror, terror burnt his expression. The hypodermic was ready.

The screen grew dark and faded as the tune switched off.

"Three hundred of them," said Scott, "just off the *Eagle.* All of them mixed up the same way, the way other ships have been since the *Wanderer.* And some of them babbling about ghostlike figures."

"What do you make of it?" said Rafferty.

Scott snorted.

"You might as well look in Haymes' volume as anywhere else. He drew a chart to attempt to explain it. Some ships were killed off; others suffered this fate. Therefore, he reasoned, there must be a common denominator somewhere. He listed all the common articles on the ships whose passengers had suffered this fate of the *Eagle.* The list was so immense it was utterly useless. Haymes claimed that only tests with those articles used as controls would ever solve the matter. As for the ghosts, he believed in them. So do Planeteers. All I know is that when I escaped, I saw nothing. There were only sounds...terrible sounds."

"You have no faith at all in that second message?"

"We place our faith in anything until we know it is useless. It has seemed unreasonable until now to put much belief in anything so...so — strange. I think about Haymes' book. It may be that if we had taken him into our confidence, he might have helped in some way. He was a prodigious worker, as his book showed. Funny about that book, the way it seems to have disappeared from bookshops. People seem to want it instinctively, wanting to read about the dan-

gers they only suspect so far, not knowing really how close the danger appears to be."

"Close?" said Rafferty.

"Yes. We have an area marked off as thin ice. This morning our patrol found the *Flambeau* well out of that area, as others have been lately. The passengers were all dead, and Dr. Crane—missing! And tracing the second message, we found that it came from somewhere in the danger area. And Dr. Crane was aboard the *Flambeau* when it took off..."

"You seem to be changing your mind," Rafferty observed, quietly.

"Perhaps. I have been thinking about it for hours. It seems so meaningless...and that may well be a clue. Haymes alive, and a pirate—it doesn't make sense. But it must be investigated."

COMMANDER Scott paused on the decision and opened his snuff box.

"You must be aware by now, Lieutenant, of the precautions we took before we decided to tell you these things. We have gone into all of your background, your personal history. We told you not because of what you knew, for that was little, but because of where it might lead you. That alone made you a dangerous man. But we try to know our men, for we ask them in these cases to carry within themselves a terrible burden. There are men among us who would not hesitate to publish the whole truth. These we fear more than any—the misguided saviors, worse than the cowardly and the mercenary. I have carried the bitter knowledge of our struggle for years. It has almost beaten me, made me into a hated ogre, a martinet whose men fear him. But it is a burden some of us must carry."

Judd Rafferty looked at his commanding officer, the cruel looking, thin little man. The inner man had been revealed. Rafferty knew then that we see each other most truly not with our eyes, but with our hearts. Sufficient understanding might transform the ugliest of men, and the lack of it blind others in the face of beauty.

Scott sat bemused, and after a while he spoke up again, matter-of-factly now.

"We are going to check on the position given in that message. Your usefulness here—" he snorted—"whatever it amounted to, has just about ended. I've been thinking perhaps you would like to volunteer for active duty aboard a combat ship that will leave shortly. The mission, I hardly need say, may be fraught with great—"

"If I may, sir. Yes, sir." Rafferty didn't wait to hear the rest.

Scott permitted himself the luxury of a half smile.

"Still can't sit still, can you? You don't know how often the red field on a star has meant blood. But you'll do. And while I'm at it, perhaps it would be just as well if Lieutenant Brown, your opponent in that little argument, were also to go. I don't know how much of the record he heard, but he hasn't been inclined to talk about it. Under the circumstances, it—"

A faint *click* came from the dictascope on the Commander's desk. Scott glanced at it as if puzzled, then he rose and strode swiftly to the door. Rafferty, following, saw him run to a desk in the outer room and look at a dictascope there.

"They were connected!" Scott cried. "The film roll with us on it—every word we said—the people in the hospital—they're all on that roll and the roll is missing!"

A wind blew in from an open window. The door to the outer room was

ajar. At that moment Lieutenant Brown entered. He saluted smartly.

"Lieutenant," said Scott, slowly. "You were in this room, according to my instructions?"

"Yes sir. Until half an hour ago, sir. I took the liberty of going out into the corridors for a smoke."

"Did you see anyone come in or go out of here?"

"No sir. I walked about a bit. Is anything wrong, sir?"

"No," said Scott, slowly. Only Rafferty could guess at the thoughts that were in the old officer's mind. A tiny record had vanished, and in it was enough dynamite to shatter the whole scheme of things to bits—to wake a dreaming world into a nightmare that was reality. "Nothing special at all," Scott was saying. "Nothing at all."

CHAPTER IV

The Invisible World

DR. Kimball Crane had been sitting hunched over in his tiny shell for a quarter of an hour when he decided that any danger from Haymes' guns was past. He had no way of knowing if Haymes had fired at all after him; his chances of escape in that event would have been one in a thousand. The probability was that Haymes hadn't wasted ammunition. Crane believed he was waiting for a slower death. And he had wanted it that way, because it had seemed to him that at least the shell offered a chance.

But when an hour had gone by, an hour in that whiteness, and he saw nothing, he wondered why he had figured on a chance. He hadn't believed the absurd story about a planet of ghosts. And yet where was he? This was no ether swirl; it was too white, too calm. Had Haymes really taken three days to bring him here? Probably not. It had been on his way, this strange phenomena that hemmed him in. And here he would die. He had done what he could. Now he could only pray that it had served some purpose.

And then he seemed to see the whiteness thinning, becoming a misty, greyish mass like smoke, and moving in streams. He know how easy it was for a desperate man to begin imagining things, and he turned his eyes back to the control board. Haymes had assumed that Crane knew how to manage a shell, Crane thought. Possibly because he had mentioned he had been an army doctor. That had been a long time before... He was trying to keep his mind active, but it was no use. Finally he had to look out again. The smoke seemed definitely thinner!

Was he really approaching some body? He thought, suddenly, that there was a way of finding out. Turn off his power and see if he went anywhere. If there was any body about, its gravitation would pull him toward it. He moved the levers down to their resting notches.

Nothing. The shell's nose tilted down a bit, that was all. But when he looked out at the thin, convoluted forms of smoke, they were rushing past him faster than ever! That meant nothing. The smoke might really be moving, and he stationary.

But the gray was thinning out, more and more...

Brilliant—so brilliant it blinded him completely! The sudden emergence into the blaze of daylight stabbed his eyes and hit the back of his head with pain as if from a blow. Through narrowed lids, Crane forced his eyes open and looked about.

He gasped. Perhaps five miles below, passing under the shell in pan-

orama, was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen—a planet bathed in sunlight and reflecting its myriad colors in dazzling beauty. Was he five miles up or was this a small planet? He could not gauge one without knowing the other. But it was rushing up at an alarming pace. He reached out and flipped the power notch on under the shell. It hissed and coughed, and slowly the shell deccelerated. There wasn't much more left in the compressed air cartridges, and the oxygen supply was running short.

NOW, knifing down obliquely, from his great height Crane saw cities more immense than York, more beautiful than the Interplanetary Fair City on Mars. The buildings shone in the sunlight as only whole fields of copper and brass, silver and gold and marble might shine, but in these walls there was more vibrant life and color than in any earthly materials.

And there were rivers and lakes of blue and violet and green, hills of dark emerald, plains that stretched like table-tops in mottled colors of subdued pastel shades. There was an emotional impact in the sight. Crane felt his eyes tearing, his breath coming with difficulty. He tore his eyes away as a man might who feared for his reason.

Was this the planet of ghosts? Though Crane had not the slightest idea where he was, he laughed abruptly at the idea. But where was he?

The question, he knew, would answer itself when he landed. It was becoming impossible to stay in his tiny craft. He nosed it down sharply and felt his body strain against the acceleration belt. He thought he could hear the shell singing as it dived through the atmosphere, for it was atmosphere of some sort; it had to be for any life to exist, even plant life.

The ground was looming and he burst several shots of air at it to slow the shell's nose. He was near a glistening white city, with many open areas in its midst, but he chose instead to land at the fringe, near the beginnings of a great plain.

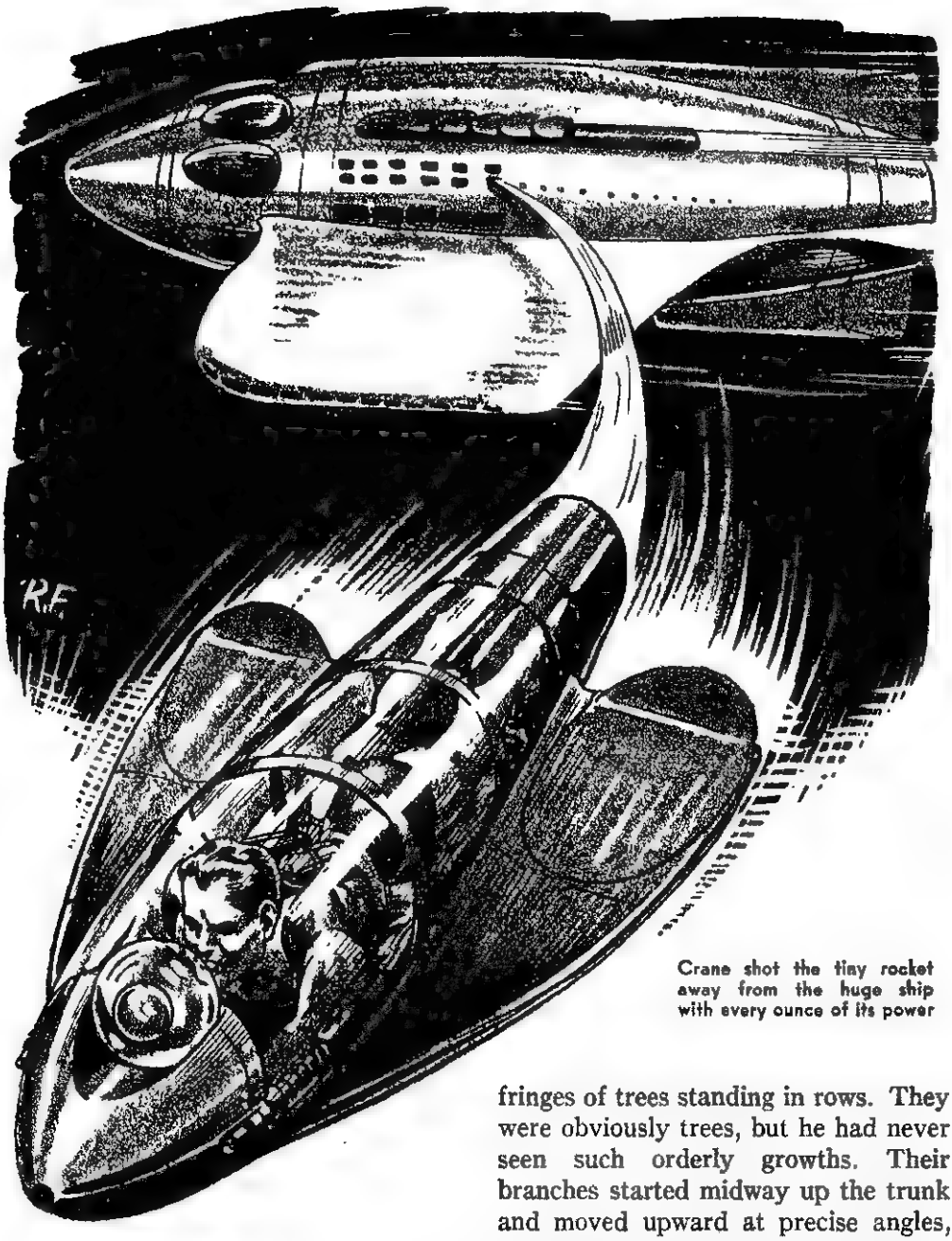
Close as he was now, he saw no signs of life. There were no aerial craft anywhere in sight, no people below. Crane shuddered momentarily as he thought of ghost cities. He was straightening out for the last gliding movement, preparing to land as easily as he could.

The shell carried no landing gear of any sort, since its sole purpose was intra-spacial, but Crane managed to land it gently by alternating the fore and aft air bursts and letting it settle down. There was hardly a bump when it was over. That was that; he had landed.

And now he faced the problem of oxygen. Should he risk taking off the tightly strapped helmet? He laughed shortly. Risk it? The waste fumes were seeping back through the feed pipes. The risk lay in not taking off that helmet. The oxygen was coming through in a trickling stream that made him gasp for breath. He had to do it.

Crane slid back the cover and felt a breeze come into the shell. With a single motion he whipped off the helmet—

THE first sensation he had was that the air was perfumed with the odors of forests and living things. The atmosphere seemed hardly different from what he remembered the Earth's had been. It was dense enough, but in addition it was infinitely more fresh than any other air he had breathed in months; better than the canned air of space liners, the weighted atmospheres of other planets that imported their oxygen, or even the somewhat sickly purity of oxygen tubes. So far as



Crane shot the tiny rocket away from the huge ship with every ounce of its power

Crane knew, here was the first body aside from Earth that possessed an atmosphere fit for humans.*

Now he edged out of the confinement of the shell, jumped out and stretched himself. On the edge of the plain where he stood, facing the city, were fringes of trees standing in rows. They were obviously trees, but he had never seen such orderly growths. Their branches started midway up the trunk and moved upward at precise angles,

* The atmosphere of almost all of the worlds of the solar system is generally unsuited to human consumption. The atmosphere of Mars is the most similar, and although its density is only about 40% that of Earth, it is comparable to a high mountain top, and humans may live in it in comparative safety. Other worlds, however, are poisonous in nature, and masks, oxygen, etc., must be used. Crane excludes Mars only because of its atmosphere's rarity.—Ed.

like the geometric drawing of an architect. Underfoot the grass was blue-green, thick and soft, but the blades of grass seemed to be each of the same height. Together they made an unbelievably natural carpet.

In the distance he could see the rest of the city, the buildings in the background taller as they were farther away, all of them forming a stair-like arrangement that escaped the bare severity of such a plan by a skillful change in the general scheme here and there. The day was warm and balmy, and the sun, smaller but just as bright, seemed to signify midday from its position in the sky, although there was no way of knowing the length of day here. Oddly enough, there was no indication of the great masses of cloud-like white through which he had come; the sky was clear.

It was like being home again in a dream, breathing the air one loved, seeing the sun, hearing the sounds of birds. Crane stood on tip-toe and breathed deeply, and for the first time in an age, he relaxed. It hardly mattered to him that there were no sounds save of birds which he could not see, and no signs of life. Wherever he was, the face of this new world was kind and hospitable...

He saw them when they were almost upon him. There was a swarm of bird-like creatures coming down from the sky toward him. The glare of the sun had hidden them, but now these great birds were swooping straight down—directly toward Crane.

When the first one landed, Crane saw they weren't birds...

They were men with wings! But they weren't men—he had never seen such men. Now, as fully twenty of them approached and stood near him, he was awe-stricken by their perfection of face and figure. Each of them was easily ten feet tall, built almost exactly like humans, bronzed and strong, with muscular arms and legs. There was individuality in their faces, but any one of them would have been an extremely handsome man on Earth. They seemed human, but human only in the sense of an ideal, and looking at the white, folded wings that grew from their shoulder-blades, Crane held his breath. They might have come from the lore of eons past—they were godlike—stalwart, beautiful gods!

All of them wore short, gaily colored tunics and sandals, and across their foreheads were bands to match the colors of their tunics.

For a moment Kimball Crane felt a high, unreasoning elation and a madness sweep through him. He said out loud to himself,

"To Heaven in a space-ship! Lord, oh Lord, where am I?" The thought struck him with a mixture of mirth and alarm, and left him chilled and quiet.

The group moved closer, towering above him. The one of the beings said to Crane in Crane's own language,

"Where have you come from, man of Earth?"

The apparent paradox dumbfounded Crane. They seemed to know that he had come from Earth, yet they questioned him about it. They asked no further question. They stood all about him, regarding him and occasionally turning to each other in silence.

A FEW moments later, two of the winged giants flew upward. They mounted to a height of some two hundred feet, and high overhead Crane heard them call in a clear, singing voice, the same sweetly thin and musical voice in which he had been addressed. The others followed aloft, and then they were flying away, leaving him there alone!

The whole had taken a minute to happen, and beyond what he had felt, Crane had the sensation that he was somehow not important, or even a curiosity. One of them had asked a paradoxical question and they had gone. They seemed quite disinterested in him or his origins or fate.

Then, from the top of a building on the edge of the city, Crane saw a shallow, flat vessel like a saucer come floating away and toward him. It drew closer and Crane made out figures in it. The vessel flew to a position directly above him, then gently came down to settle five feet away.

There were two men in the vessel—two humans! They regarded Crane and one of them motioned him to come into the vessel. Slowly, Crane moved to them, seeing their shaven heads, their long, flowing robes of deep blue, and their eyes, lusterless and very clear and very empty — completely empty. One of them helped Crane sit down, then nodded to the other. Several score of tiny revolving blades all around the edges of the vessel began to move. The saucer ascended quickly, the blades curved inward, and the vessel began to head in the direction from which it had come.

There was something about these men that had prevented Crane from saying a word to them. They seemed to be part of the machine in which they sat. Somehow, with their half-open mouths, their intent stare into the vacant sky, they were not human, but organisms fitted into a mobile, human form for some reason.

"Hello," said Crane. He might not have uttered a sound for all the attention it got him.

Suddenly the eyes of the two creatures were fixed on something beyond Crane, something over his shoulder; the shadow lay in the vessel. Crane twisted around. Behind him, a few feet overhead, one of the winged giants hovered. His gaze was stern, more stern than Crane had imagined one of these beings could be. Crane's vessel was suddenly moving around, heading out across the plain again, as if in response to a silent command.

Like light flashing on in darkness, Crane heard—but he heard it in his mind alone, understood it, for no voice had spoken—*"Do not be afraid, man from Earth. Let the bikko take you where I have directed."*

The winged being was moving farther away now in leisurely flight. He rose higher and higher and soon disappeared from sight. What had spoken to Crane? This being...it could only have been...the only thing he could imagine it had been was—telepathy!

These creatures in the vessel with him, they had reacted as if to telepathized orders. Were they the bikko to which the winged giant had referred? And where were they now going?

THE saucer was moving over the countryside. Everywhere it looked like an idealized painting, a beautiful land in natural splendor. There were birds following them, birds with long, brilliantly colored tails, and they flew alongside like pets might after their master. But in a moment one of the two blue-clad humans in the vessel had reached out with a long pole and struck one of the birds, frightening them all away. Crane's first impulse was to stop the shaven-head. The next instant, watching the second one, Crane changed his mind. They seemed apprehensive of something. They were flying over fields of yellow grass-like growth, and the second creature had spread a large yellow cloth inside the shallow vessel, draping part of it over themselves and Crane. Some moments

later, when the country underneath had changed to pale green, another cloth to match this color was substituted. They were camouflaging their vessel! Against whom? For what?

The answer could only have been that they were afraid of other winged beings, for every time they spied one in the distance, they lowered the vessel and let it hover inches above ground, stationary. There was no understanding it. And there was no one to whom he could turn.

Crane was not the sort of man on whom alarm could descend without reason. There was no cause for alarm now, but hammering in his mind was an insistent question, and other questions followed. *Where am I?* he kept saying to himself. What is this strange world of which I have never heard a single word? And what was Haymes' connection with all this, with this world unknown to men?

There was safety in asking no questions; he would only destroy himself by demanding answers. He had to remain calm... He tried to think of the vessel in which he was, of its queer composition, its two little knobs that directed it, the odd cloths and unknown fibre which covered it inside.

The cloth was changed again, this time to a deep green. Looking out over the side, Crane saw a forest underneath. They were barely swimming over the uniformly sized trees. And not far away, from the cover of the trees, a winged giant suddenly rose, glanced at their saucer, and disappeared from view again. The vessel veered sharply, turning to where the winged being had been, and when it reached the spot, it gently lowered itself to a small clearing below.

The giant was waiting there, standing on the ground. The vessel had almost touched ground when Crane heard, again in his mind alone, *"Jump."*

Crane did as he was told; he jumped from the saucer which had not quite touched ground. The winged being came closer, scrutinized the outside of the vessel, and brushed off some scattered leaves. Evidently he was intent on leaving no trace of where this vessel had been. Then the giant transfixed the two blue-clad humans with a glance, looked at them steadily for some moments, and turned away.

The vessel rose again, paused, and moved out of view. Crane was alone with the winged giant.

"I will speak to you orally," the giant was saying. "Telepathy seems to confuse you as yet. Listen to me carefully, for there is little time."

Crane listened to that high voice speaking to him in whispers.

"You have escaped from the man Peter Haymes and your life is in jeopardy. There is almost nowhere you can hide with safety. If you are discovered, you will be driven to destruction. What were you on Earth? Open your mind to me; it will save time."

Bewildered, Crane tried to open his mind, meanwhile thinking that he hadn't the faintest idea of how to do it. Now, if it had been his mouth—

"You have merely to focus your mind on the answer," said the giant. He kept looking about him from time to time. "Fortunately, you were a doctor. I almost guessed as much from your white tunic. Now listen. Not far from here, there is a small settlement of nottars, creatures originally human and bred by we llanu for generations as hunting animals, to destroy a pestilential animal, the boranny. Remember these words and ask no questions; they must wait. You will go to this settlement and don the clothes of the last doctor, who is now dead. The

search for you will begin very soon. You must remember several things. First, *you are Doctor Bell.* Second, you have been in the settlement for *four months.* Third, you must look weary and appear depressed."

The giant stopped, intent upon some sound which came faintly through the forest, a fairly distant wailing from many throats. After a moment, the winged being resumed.

"If any llanu, that is, winged men, come, try not to be near the nottars at the time. You will find a wounded one among the nottars. You must try to save it as much as possible from death. For the rest, if any llanu telepathize questions at you, remember this: we cannot read your mind unless you focus on the answer. Give only the answers to questions as to who you are, and how long you have been there, and immediately thereafter, *concentrate upon something else,* preferably your longing for Earth, and a desire to sleep. To all other questions, give no answer; concentrate on your fatigue. Your ignorance may save you, but it is best not to take the chance.

"And now, if we do not meet again, my name is Oran. Never speak to any llana unless he first gives you that name. Good fortune."

The giant made a signal for Crane to follow him, and together they moved through the forest. The wailing they had heard grew louder as they kept walking, and presently the giant stopped. Through the edges of the forest, for it came to an abrupt end not far away, Crane saw rows of low hovels, and somewhat apart from them, a hut larger than the rest. The winged being pointed to the large hut. The next moment he had turned and begun silently retracing his steps.

Crane was alone...

What was he to do? The bizarre speech to which he had listened had filled him with vague apprehension. There was no meaning in what the being had told him. And why had he told him those things? Was he defending Crane against Haymes or other ...llanu? Why?

He was filled with a great indecision, and the startling instructions and strange names he had heard were ringing in his head. But Kimball Crane had long ago evolved a philosophy. Never remain idle when there is something to do; never let indecision interfere with action. Wrong action might result poorly, but it was the only way to learn. The only thing here was that it seemed possible that if Crane acted wrongly just once, he wouldn't be around to learn anything much longer...

HE was walking out of the forest, into the clearing around which the hovels were clustered. There was a throng of humans, naked except for loin cloths, gathered at one end of the clearing. As he crossed into open view, that whole throng which had been wailing suddenly was stilled, and every eye followed Crane as he strode to the large hut. Crane let no curiosity stop him from following instructions. As a doctor and a soldier, he had learned to listen and obey, and he had frequently given orders which he knew his subordinates could not understand, yet he had known how vital it was that they obey exactly, unquestioningly...

But whom was he obeying? A friend? It appeared that way. But how could he be certain? What if the other winged beings had been friends, and this one, this Oran, an enemy? Then, as Crane was entering the dank, dark hovel, he laughed at himself the way he always did when he reached an impasse in his thinking. He should

have demanded a written guarantee, perhaps, and if Oran was an enemy, he would hale him to court in York. That was the only recourse he would have. And laughing out loud now at the notion, Crane saw that the entrance to the hut was thick with the humans he had seen clustered at the other end of the settlement. They were regarding him intently, but none entered.

The hovel was almost entirely bare. A little light seeped in through cracks in the ceiling, which seemed covered with grass mats. Crane suddenly wondered why this was the only hut which had a roof. But then, hanging on a wall, supported by a sliver of wood, were several ragged garments of dirty white that contrasted sharply with his still clean tunic. And on the floor beside the clothes, there stood a little black bag. He opened it. Inside it were the tools of his trade—a doctor's instruments!

Crane turned to the door, where the crowd had grown.

"Shoo!" he shouted, making a face. He had seen by their faces that there was no one here to whom he might say, "May I have a little privacy whilst I dress?".

They scattered away, but he was about half-way through changing into the soiled clothes when they had regathered. They were so absolutely savage, with their sharp, white teeth, their tangled hair, their wiry, lean, deeply burnt brown bodies, that Crane forbore shouting again. It was really as if he was alone anyhow. And he was a doctor, accustomed to human bodies as much as any savage could possibly be, he smiled to himself.

The tunic into which he changed was small on him; Crane was a tall man. And furthermore, it was so soiled that his spine seemed to shiver in distaste. But it had the effect of making Crane seem somehow feel at home among the savages. He stepped out among them ready to embrace each one, feeling foolishly cheerful and grinning from ear to ear. A planet of ghosts indeed! It was a planet full of research possibilities.

And all at once, remembrance of a phrase of the winged being smashed into Crane's mind. He had said that these humans had been bred for generations. For generations! These were humans, not savages in the swamps of Venus, not primitive men who had degenerated in the early isolated camps on Jupiter, not beings from another world at all—but men and women like the people he had known all his life! And they had been bred for generations! How was it possible? What did it mean? The foreboding of disaster had come full-grown to him now. He stopped smiling.

THE nottars, he had to think of them by that name, were shouting to him. "Attoo - boranny - nottar." That was the way it sounded. Half of them were motioning wildly to the part of the settlement where Crane had first seen them, and half of them were motioning toward the hut. Then one of them, more ingenious than the rest, ran forward with a long stick, reached inside the hut with it, and withdrew it with the black bag dangling from the end of the stick. The nottars jumped up and down, and now all were clamoring that he follow them.

Crane saw the prostrate form of the savage before he had taken a dozen steps. Those still around him were withdrawn to give him entry. He ran the rest of the way.

There were little spurts of blood coming from the belly of the savage, coming from three neatly drilled holes there. He bent down, examined the

wounds. The nottar had suffered more from fear and loss of blood than anything else. Crane was busy at once. The black bag, carried by one of the eager savages, was well stocked. He cleaned the wounds, sutured them quickly, then applied the dressings. He motioned other nottars to carry the wounded one—Crane still had no idea as to what had caused the wounds—to one of the open-roofed hovels.

And then he was treated to a strange sight. The nottars, and there were more than a hundred, men, women and children of all ages, who had gathered around Crane while he worked on the wounded man, had been intoning a sort of free-for-all chant, like a wild invocation. Upon completion of the treatment, they began to gyrate madly, leaping about in abandon, and shouting at the tops of their lusty voices. Many of them ran to Crane and momentarily kneeled before him. All in all, Crane felt that a celebration had been put on to acclaim the wounded nottar's return from certain death, and even more, to honor him. He felt somehow that there was a vast outpouring of affection, gratitude and respect for him. It moved him more deeply than he would have thought possible.

Now several nottars came running to him, bearing the bodies of small, furry animals, three-legged and three-eyed, and over each eye was a long, pointed horn. "Boranny, boranny," they shouted. Crane had his answer. This was the little animal the nottars hunted, and not without danger. And the danger explained, possibly, the necessity for a doctor among them.

They were skinning the animals now, and no sooner was one skinned, than its entrails were removed and the raw meat torn away and eaten on the spot by the clamoring nottars. But not before they had first offered to Crane his choice of any part of the animal, and he refused. The refusal reminded him for the first time that he was hungry, damned hungry.

It was as if thinking about it had somehow materialized an answer. Two large vessels, like the one in which he had been, had appeared from nowhere. They moved to the center of the village, hovering in mid-air some fifteen feet, and the bikko in them were throwing down food from the loaded vessels. Now there was yelling for certain. The savages ran to the vessels, scooping up as much as they could carry. And again they came to him to offer him his choice.

"Home was never like this," murmered Crane, taking a large, bright red fruit the size of a melon. He bit into it, and added, "Right!" It was as hard as a frozen potato, with as much taste as a stone might have had. He tried another fruit, long and slender and whitish, and a third, a sort of dried apricot-looking affair, and returned to the frozen potato. "Stomach ulcers in a week," he grunted, trying to chew.

HE WAS struck by the appearance of two of the nottars who were squatting near him. He could have sworn they were smiling at his distress.

Suddenly, their half-smiles had vanished, and a rustle of fear and unrest swept through the settlement. The nottars paused in their eating, their faces uplifted to the sky. Crane followed their gaze and gulped. A group of llanu were flying swiftly toward the settlement!

Their immense wings blotted out the sun as they swept down, each lighting gingerly in the clearing. Many of these llanu, unlike the others Crane had seen, were old in appearance, and the edges of their wings were flecked or stained with a yellow-golden hue. They came

quite close to Crane, who was even then trying to remember what Oran had told him.

"What is your name?" The question rang in an inner ear.

"Dr. Bell," said Crane aloud. He was trying to be sad, distressed.

"What is your number?"

Crane looked blank.

"What number?" he asked.

"How long have you been here?"

"Four months."

He had to look weary and depressed, Crane was telling himself. But more than that, he was telling himself that he didn't like the way they were questioning him. He could almost feel their minds probing in his brain, and the look on their faces, their proud and arrogant faces, was much the same look that they bestowed on the nottars. Be careful, Crane was telling himself. This might be a matter of life and death. He was a babe in the hands of these giants, old though they might be. They were out hunting him, and he had to remember his instructions.

"How did you trim the hairs of your beard?"

The question, searching and intelligent though it was, for Crane had but a few days' growth on his face, had a side to it that seemed irrepressibly funny to Crane. It destroyed every bit of caution that Crane had gathered. He chuckled and looked at them, not knowing what to say.

"What is your number?"

That meaningless question, repeated, did the trick.

"York 12—8801," he responded. "Where can I reach you boys?"

In later minutes, Crane was to wonder why he had not been put to death at that very instant, but at the moment he was riding high. The only response to what he had said was simple. One of the llanu opened a little pouch he carried and dipped his hand into it. He came up close to Crane and scattered a blue powder over him.

Still amused, Crane watched the llanu depart, one by one. They were out of sight in a little while, flying slowly now.

His first intimation that something had gone wrong came when Crane looked about him. The nottars were scattering. Some of them were carrying babies, others nothing more precious than food, but all of them were running—running from him!

Crane rose from where he had been sitting and tried to shake the blue dust from him. It would not come off! He smashed his hand against his clothes and still it clung. What was it? Why were they fleeing?

Here and there a nottar paused to look at him, fearfully. He sensed a vast sorrow mingling with their fear. Slowly the realization came to Crane that he had been marked—singled out! For what? He looked about the almost deserted settlement, hushed as if with brooding expectancy, and felt like a condemned man. Suddenly he began to tear the clothes off—to no avail . . . the blue powder had gone through! It was all over his chest and arms and legs, a dye in his skin, and nothing would remove it! He ran to his bag which a nottar had thrown into the hut again, seeking for some solution which might remove the fearful stain. There was none to do it . . .

IT WAS by then well in the afternoon. The sun had begun to cast long shadows, and twilight was descending, a beautiful twilight that was pierced by brilliant streaks of light from the setting sun as it fell over the horizon in the midst of trailing canopies of resplendent color.

Crane sat down, wearily, alone . . .

In the distance he seemed to see winged beings aloft. He was filled with a sense of utter desolation, and a vast loneliness came over him, a nameless fear and oppression such as he had never known. He had come through much, and now he felt it was ending. Ending soon so ingloriously, as Haymes had said, like a brief comet wasting itself. He was so far from home, on a world which had seemingly escaped detection from the great eyes of telescopes scattered through the solar system, from the constant wanderings of innumerable space voyages . . . or, had they, like so many others, had their discoveries translated into captivity here?

He was suddenly obsessed with the notion that the world he had left behind was falling to bits, and the fragments were visible in the first few stars that had come out in the darking sky. He had heard stories, all sorts of stories in his life. Had there been some truth to them?

There was so much he didn't know, so much that he wanted to live for. He was descending now within himself, to a world of quiet and shadow, like the world outside. He looked at the blue stains on him, and saw how they were beginning to glow with phosphorescence that would make him visible in the dark, and it brought him no further alarm. He was cold and shivering now, and memories were flooding his mind, like the memories of a drowning man. And more than ever he felt something in the air that was not placid, a gathering tension, like the ominous charge of death.

He lay on his back, trying not to remember, not to think. Worst of all was not knowing what to expect. There never was an Earth, he thought. I was born here long ago, and here I will die.

The sky had become as black as the past; the few stars were fathomless questions. From far off he heard the timid calls of nottars. The night air was filled with sweet smells that came from the woods, the smells of living things, and they seemed then to have an overwhelming fragrance, as all living things must have for men about to die.

He seemed to hear forgotten voices whispering to him in the sighing of the wind—

But there was no wind. And slowly, the voices were louder . . .

It broke all at once. The sounds, like tragic melodies, bringing with them the fierce terror that only the memory of terror can bring, left him cold and helpless. His muscles had ceased to respond to his demands, his body lay flexed and shaking, and the moaning that rose in the air beat over him in horrible waves.

When he saw the first of the dim forms, he knew why Haymes had called this a planet of ghosts. He saw them now, hovering, bare traceries of form, transparent and unreal. And stronger than he had seen it before was the aura that suffused them, following them as the nebulous fire of a comet's tail follows the flashing head; a golden aura that glittered like a wet veil that had been dipped in golden dust and then lit by the flickering light of a fire.

It was a maddening cacaphony, the horrible orchestral music of an unplanned masterpiece, tearing at his heart and brain. The figures were wheeling faster and faster, coming lower, and the sounds had grown beyond endurance . . .

CHAPTER V

Chlorophyl

"HERE now, sit up!"

A hand was stuck in Crane's ribs, unmistakably.

"Sit up and don't move!"

It was a human voice, shouting above the terrifying failing. Crane sat up. In the blue, phosphorescent light that his body gave off, he saw two—nottars! One of them had spoken to him!

"Take it easy, Doc," the nottar was yelling. "And don't be surprised at anything that happens to you. It won't last much longer."

The golden figures were whirling now at a tremendous speed, and their golden light was added to the blue. Crane forced his eyes to stay open, and he held his ears with his hands.

Suddenly one of the figures broke from the circle and shot down at the three men, seemingly passing through them. Even as it seemed to let out a great cry of pain, the others were following the first. But not all followed. That outcry, like a tortured howl that ripped at the roots of Crane's nerves, seemed to have stopped them. The last of the figures shot away with the others.

One moment chaos. The next—complete silence. The figures vanished and the sounds had stopped. The only sensation Crane had had was that his eyes had been shuttling back and forth at great speed, seemingly from several places, as if he had been moving, which he hadn't. He couldn't have moved, literally, to save his life.

Out of the feverish thoughts that ran through him, one was paramount. He was still alive. He moved one hand, then the other. He was all there.

"You all right, Doc?"

Crane was looking at the nottars. He couldn't make out anything of their faces. In the weird darkness, illumined only by that blueness, he saw only their dark, nude bodies. One of them seemed to be holding something. Crane nodded, then said.

"Are you talking to me?"

"He's all right," said the second nottar. "Let's get into that hut."

"Come on, Doc," said the first. "Shake the cramp out of your legs."

Crane followed the two nottars in the darkness. All three went into the large, roofed hut. One of the nottars began to dig in the ground, and the other went out for several moments, returning shortly.

"Still scared, Doc?"

"Who are you?" Crane had difficulty talking.

"Just a couple of educated nottars," one answered. "We went to Harvard and never got over it."

"Let the questions wait a minute, Doc," said the other. "We're too damn hungry to talk sense. Get it going yet, Steve?"

The savage whom the second had called Steve was busy with something. A tiny flame caught in a pile of brush, then grew larger, and Crane saw what was happening. They were rubbing two sticks together, making a fire in primitive fashion. There were ashes of previous fires dug up in the hut, and the charred wood that had been buried took the flames well.

"Cover up that doorway," said a nottar.

"How?" said the other. "Them damned nottars swiped the mat I took two weeks making. And they been poking holes in the roof."

"Good thing those babies came tonight. This is the first meal I won't have to gulp. There won't be a soul around after that business."

CRANE was just sitting there, listening to the conversation. The nottars were roasting boranny meat on crude spits over the fire.

"Here, Doc, try this. Isn't half bad. We haven't had a chance to rake a fire in two nights. The nottars are watching us lately."

Crane took the meat and ate. It was tender and rather sweet, and the solid nourishment made him feel better. In the light of the fire he was looking at the two savages in the hut with him. They were the same two that he had imagined had been laughing at him. Their hunched bodies, a deeply burnt brown, and their great masses of hair threw crazy shadows on the walls of the hut. Their teeth weren't long at all. One of them was a slender person with a rather wolfish face and thick brows. The other was heavier, and his eyes gleamed humorously at Crane.

"Can't figure us out, can you, Doc?" he said, his mouth full of food. "How long you been here?"

"Didn't you get that?" said the other to the first. "I almost yelled out loud when the big boy asked him that question. The Doc said, 'Four months,' and meanwhile, plain as day, his mind is telling them. 'That's the answer I'm supposed to give instead of one day.' They nailed him easy enough after that. He wasn't thinking of the answers at all. He was thinking of what he had been told to say were the answers." He laughed.

"What got me was the way he told them his number," said the other. "That'll kill 'em when it gets around. It killed me. I had to run."

"Who are you?" said Crane, quietly. They were almost through with the food.

One of the nottars wiped his mouth appreciatively. He held out a hand to Crane.

"I'm Steve. They call me Honeyboy. This is Tommy." The men shook hands all around.

"Now suppose you tell us about how you got here," said the one who had been called Tommy. "What we have to tell you can wait a while."

"You aren't nottars," said Crane. "That seems pretty plain."

"Thanks," said Steve, grinning. "No, we're not. We're here on business, and this is the only safe way to travel around here. Nice disguise, huh? Now let's hear your end of it."

Crane began with the hailing of the *Flambeau* and told the two everything that had happened to him. Both men listened intently to the recital saying nothing except to ask a question now and then. When Crane had finished they were quiet for several minutes.

Presently Steve said.

"You're sure that message got out?"

"Almost dead certain."

"It's the first time," said Tommy. He was about forty years old, and it was odd to think of him with that youthful name. He looked at his younger companion and shrugged.

"Wonder what they'll do," he said.

BOTH men were grave, preoccupied with their thoughts. They seemed to have forgotten Crane entirely for the while. When finally Steve did turn to Crane, his manner was still a bit distant.

"We don't know much, Doc," he said, "and we've been here more than ten years. But we'll tell you what we know. We first got here when our ship, the *Meteor II*, crashed into this planet, which is known as Amanas. It crashed because—"

"Wait a minute," said Crane. "The *Meteor II* is a biological survey ship, isn't it?"

"Was."

"That's just it. The *Meteor II* is still intact. I know because they called at the South Venus colony two years ago while I was there."

Steve regarded Tommy. "Same thing Doc Spellman said," he muttered.

"Spellman?" said Crane. "He committed suicide a year ago."

"He's still alive, a couple of hundred miles from here," said Steve. "Where did you hear that?"

"They told me Spellman had gone crazy with the heat in Mercury," said Crane, "and swallowed acid."

"He was aboard the *Raven,*" said Tommy, "when Haymes took off the passengers and sold those who were still alive down the river."

"I never heard a word about the *Raven* going under," cried Crane.

"What's the use?" said Steve. "I told you we don't know much. The only thing we figured out was that nobody on Earth seems to know what's been going on. They're keeping the whole thing quiet, and it staggers my imagination to think about how they've managed to do it. Tommy and I are colonists ourselves, from Church's planet. We've been hearing stories since we were kids. At least we suspected."

"Where were you?" Crane broke the silence.

"Yeh. Well, the *Meteor II* crashed because the whole crew was wiped out. Tommy and I were in the laboratory when the Raie—that's what they call those babies who came to visit you about an hour ago—when they went through the ship. That's what saved us, along with one or two others who aren't around any more. When we saw the ship diving out of control we made a rush for the crash chambers. And we lived through it. Haymes wasn't around yet in those days. The llanu took us off and got us to work on their shrubbery. Then they found out we were suspecting too much and they got the notion we would be better off as bikko — the boys in the blue bathrobes. Know what's wrong with them? *They're decerebrated!* The *llanu* take out most of their brains, and then they move them around by telepathy! A nice business, isn't it?

"Well, Tommy and I couldn't see ourselves in blue, so we beat it. We knew enough by then to know the worst the llanu could do to us, and we took the chance. Listen, Dr. Crane—"

"How do you know my name?"

"Ah, everybody knows it by now. Your mind was yelling it at those llanu when you said 'Dr. Bell.' Tommy and I have picked up a few things around here in our time. We listened in on that questioning . . ."

A BRIEF silence fell over the men, and they sat gazing into the last embers of the fire, none of them thinking of anything in particular, and yet all of them quieted somehow.

"Dr. Crane, do you know how many humans there are on this planet?" said Steve. "Maybe ten thousand, in one form or another. They've been taking them off ships for almost two hundred years. They've got them hunting animals, as nottars, and cultivating undersea fungi for food, as spregg, and they use them as personal servants, as bikko. Some have more brains than others. And there are a handful of men like us, still sound in mind and body, because they need them, because they have to have them around to take care of the nottars and the spregg. And because the rebels among the llanu are anxious to have normal men on Amanas."

"Rebels?" said Crane.

"Like that Oran," said Tommy. "There are maybe a thousand of them. They all use the same name. Oran means 'heathen' in the language of the llanu. They're the most religious race you ever heard of—and the most bloodthirsty, when you look at what they want objectively."

"What do they want?"

"The Earth!"

"What for?"

"I don't know. They're ready to knock off every living being on Earth. Their word for Earth is Poros. It means 'End of Sorrow.' It's tied up with their religion in some way. The rebels are heathens, and they are against the plan of the priests. But they don't have anything to do with us because we killed a couple of llanu once by accident. Death is the worst thing that can happen to them. They're forbidden to kill anything at all. That's why they use nottars to hunt for them; they can't even kill the boranny."

"But they do kill," said Crane. "I saw them do it. They might have killed me tonight if you hadn't saved me. I still don't know how."

"They don't kill," said Steve. "The Raie do it. It isn't the same thing. And when you've got something to stop the Raie, they can't touch you outside of trying to get the bikko to heave you off a high place or something, and the bikko are the lousiest fighters you ever saw. Before Haymes came into the picture there wasn't a thing the llanu could do. Now Haymes comes after us from time to time with heat guns."

"Heat guns!" said Crane suddenly. "I've got one!" He jumped up and ran through his tunic, still hanging on the wall.

"Don't bother looking," said Steve. "Oran probably took it away without your knowing it. There are no weapons on Amanas except the ones Haymes and his men tote. The llanu are afraid they might be used on them, but they seem to let Haymes carry them, maybe because they can't stop him."

Crane found nothing in his tunic. Confused, he sat down again.

"What has Haymes got to do with all this?" he said.

"We thought at first that he had made some kind of a bargain with them, that he was acting like a slave trader. Then when we found out what had happened to him on Earth, and the way he disappeared and showed up here, we didn't know what to think. From things we hear from time to time, like the stuff you told us, it seems he's working with them for another reason, maybe as a partner. They don't like him much. When he goes out among them, he has a bodyguard of twenty men. But since he appeared, the ships that have disappeared have mounted by the threes."

"What does it all mean?" said Crane, slowly.

"It means," Steve answered, his finger drawing a line across the ground, "that pretty soon there won't be that old place we used to call home. Tommy and I have been fighting from undercover for years, and where has it gotten us? If Haymes hadn't come, maybe we would have organized a decent revolution here. We're still trying."

"How?" said Crane.

"YOU haven't been here long enough," said Steve. "You haven't seen the way other normal humans appear after awhile. They're the sorriest creatures on Earth — on Amanas. They're desolate, they're lonely, they're filled with a strange sadness—the way that Oran told you to act. That would have been normal for a doctor here four months. When they don't kill themselves, they go crazy."

"Tell him the rest in a hurry," said Tommy. "We haven't much time."

"Time for what?" said Steve. "We aren't going any place." He chuckled disconsolately. "That's the way they all sound, Doc. It's getting me now a little. You know what it is? These llanu have whisperers among them. They are a special group whose func-

tion it is to fly around where there are normal people, humans, and whisper to them. You had a taste of it, I think, when you were out there alone a while back. You don't even know there's anyone telling you things, making you think the things you're thinking. They take the spirit out of a man. Take away a man's will to fight and what have you got? That's a refinement of telepathy that's got hypnotism whipped to a standstill.

"That's where we come in. Tommy and I do pretty well in the telepathic business. It's mostly a language of symbols. Our language isn't easy for Ilanu to get, but with their brains, when they do get it, they're damned good at it. But they can't read your mind if you won't focus on what they're after. Tommy and I let our hair grow and we act like nottars or like spregg, or even once, like bikko. The language of the primitive humans — they've bred 'em long enough—doesn't have more than two dozen words, and when we think in those words, they can't tell us apart.

"So that's what we do. We go around from place to place undoing the work of the whisperers, educating the normal humans, and showing them how to get away from the Raie."

"How did you save me?"

"We held on to one of these lilacs."

"What?" Crane looked at an Earthly lilac plant which Tommy took from one of the darkened corners of the hut. "You're not kidding?"

"No." Steve's expression changed from one of half-hearted banter to an earnestness that was almost sad to see. "It's all we have and it isn't much. You see, Tommy and I were playing with this plant, or its great-great-great grandfather, when the *Meteor II* went down. It saved us."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Yes it does." Tommy shook his head with a half-smile of sympathy. It was strange to see these men smile. They looked like savages, crouching low in a red and blue darkness, hardly able to see each other. "Did you notice any of the leaves on the trees when you came here?" Did you see that greenish light that Haymes played on the Raie? That's the answer. Doctor, *there is no chlorophyl on this planet.*"

When they thought that the words had made their impression, Steve took up the conversation. "All the trees and plants that you see on this planet are not real! They're synthetic . . . in a way. Oh, they're real enough in most ways. They grow, they reproduce, they have seeds—but even the seeds have to be nursed. Their plants don't have chlorophyl."*

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*Steve is wrong here. What is chlorophyl? A catalyst, which when sunlight is present, uses the radiant energy of light to reduce carbon dioxide and water. It transforms radiant energy into potential chemical energy of formaldehyde and free oxygen. The oxygen is a waste product, and the formaldehyde is quickly condensed to glucose or other monosac-charoses.

The glucose is quickly converted to starch. Thus, carbohydrates, an organic compound, are made from inorganic elements by photosynthesis, the process at the base of all life. From carbohydrates and inorganic salts, the plant cell synthesizes all the amino acids found in natural proteins, as it does fats and phospholipins. This, simplified, explains plant life on Earth. The plant makes its own food and expends it on its natural functions, as growth, respiration, and so on.

But here, on this strange world, the nutrition is not holophytic, but rather, almost holozoic. The plants are fed *from underground*. Some are fed inorganic nitrogen compounds which, like yeast, they can use to synthesize amino-acids, some can only use a reduced form like ammonia, some can use complex substances like protein, starch or cellulose, by secreting enzymes and undergoing extra-cellular digestion. All must be fed with an organic compound—sugar. They must have that.

In that way, they are very much like Earthly fungi. They are like yeasts, and they act like saprophytes, or parasites, or lichens.

Whatever form these plants and trees have, that is their nutrition. They are artificial, modeled for some strange reason after plants like those we have on Earth.—Ed.

"Not so," Steve said. "These Ilanu have succeeded, I am certain, in finding another source of energy than sunlight. They synthesize the food they feed these plants with that energy, perhaps atomic energy. They have colored their plants with internal pigments so that again they resemble earthly plants, although chlorophyl, which has a green pigment, is entirely missing."

AS STEVE paused, Crane waited a moment. It was so strange to hear him speaking in formal language after listening to his colonist's slangy way of expressing himself. Probably the years here had also had their share in submerging the scientist within Steve. He had not even given another name. Just Steve.

"Wrong again, Doc." Steve smiled. "You forget I know what's going on in that head of yours. I haven't been submerged. I am like a swimmer in an impossible sea, content to float awhile until I see something to swim to. What took me a minute to tell you, I was years in finding out. And I still don't know why the Ilanu have done all this. It isn't reasonable. But maybe when I know that, I'll know everything.

"There's just this left to tell. Chlorophyl, a completely extraneous substance here, nothing more than a complex ester with the physical properties of lipins, soluble in ether or alcohol but not in water, formed of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and magnesium—is a poisonous substance to the Raie!

"Don't ask me why. I don't know. I don't know what the Raie are. I think they're some sort of half-alive substance, a stabilized energy form of a kind, and chlorophyl tends to destroy their balance. They seem to have a consciousness. Haymes can direct them. The priests, I have heard, can communicate with them. But when they come near chlorophyl . . ."

"Yes?" said Crane, suddenly tense.

"Something peculiar happens. Ordinarily the Raie kills humans. But when they come near chlorophyl, something strange happens. They seem to be able to—how can I tell you this—to take out the essence of a human being, his personality, his 'I am,' and exchange it for another. If there is no other human about, that cannot happen."

"But why didn't—" Crane began.

"It did. It happened before outside. It happened so fast you didn't even know it. Remember when you seemed to be looking on from several different places at once? You were, actually. The fortunate thing was that this time, the switches came out all right in the end. Tommy and I were a little afraid, in advance, thinking about how you might have reacted if the switch hadn't been completed. Tommy and I have been switched for weeks on end sometimes. We seem to get along in each other's bodies, though, don't we, Tommy?"

Tommy smiled.

"I'm going to chop off one of your arms next time I'm you," he said. "You eat too fast for me."

Crane couldn't believe what he heard. It sounded so—

"Yeh, it's crazy," Steve agreed. "Once I was in the body of some half-gone bikko in the brass city. That was a close call. I'll tell you about it sometime . . . if we're all still around . . ."

"The way you joke about it." It was all Crane could say.

"You're quite a joker, yourself," said Tommy. "Maybe that's why we three are alive after what's happened to us. I have a theory—"

"SAVE it," Steve interrupted, grinning. "The thing is, as long as we

can joke, we know we're safe from the whisperers, at least. And it saves our courage. We have a lot of work here. I have a little laboratory fixed up a long way from here, and in between our road trips—" he grinned again—"keeping up the local morale, I work on the lilacs. We grow them and give the seeds away, making more and more lilacs. Once, three years ago, we had a little city of our own, completely surrounded by lilacs. They had to get Haymes to come and tear it down. That's when he found out about us. But if we live, maybe some day we'll win out."

"It doesn't seem possible," said Crane.

"That's no way to talk."

"Maybe not," said Crane. "Anyway, no matter what I say, I'll probably act as if salvation was ten minutes away. A good thing, too."

The conversation was p e t e r i n g out . . .

"What probably saved me on the *Flambeau,*" Crane mused aloud, "was that I was playing around with the Venusian swamp fever serum when the Raie broke out. It was the chlorophyl, and not Haymes that spared me." In a moment he added, "But I can't figure out why he didn't just kill me on the *Flambeau* when he came back. Was I a good audience?"

"Bothers me too," said Tommy.

"Probably bothers Haymes more than any of us," said Steve.

After a moment, Tommy added.

"I hope to God he isn't bothered for nothing." There was something fervent in the way he said it. "It seems like the only way out. They've got to find out about us. They've got to help us. Don't they know what's happening? Don't they?"

"Save it," said Steve.

"Hey!" Crane ejaculated. He was on the point of saying something.

"You can save it too," said Tommy. "We know all about it. You saw Haymes stab the Raie with that green ray. Maybe if you'd gotten us one, we'd know what's in it. Steve and I think Haymes found some way of getting the chlorophyl to do things to the Raie that stops them from doing anything at all. That's what Steve meant by his laboratory. We've been working on it for two years."

"And when we get it," said Steve, lying down and yawning, "then we'll make a space-ship out of a couple of trees and beat it out of here."

"That's as good a note as any to go to sleep on," said Tommy, stretching out near Steve. "There's a big day ahead of us tomorrow. We're going hunting in the forest. That's why we're here now." He mumbled something about explaining better in the morning. Then he grunted. "Doc, will you turn off that blue light? It's going to keep me awake all night."

Crane looked at the phosphorescent glow on him and laughed.

"It'll go away in a couple of days," said Steve, sleepily. "And don't worry. We're safe enough here as long as Haymes' lads don't come, and the lilacs keep doing their share. So go to sleep."

Crane slowly lay down, his brain still restive, tired as he was. What a day it had been! How much beyond his imagination . . .

Here he was, alone on a distant planet, an unknown planet, with two men who had been strangers some short hours before. Now they were the closest kin he possessed. He was more glad he met them than he could tell himself, so glad and so moved that he almost felt like crying.

Where would it all end?

There was some comfort in the com-

pany of two brave and intelligent men. Crane never thought of himself as either brave or intelligent. He just went along, the way he had all his life, being a doctor or a soldier or an extra hand at a dice game, living the way he thought a man should live and not bothering to mull about it too much.

In that way he was more like his two new companions than he realized, but the realization was not lost on them.

He remembered again Haymes' words about the comet wasting itself. He had been wrong. There was more than one comet, there were many more. And if there were enough, perhaps . . . "You have fallen into the orbit of a plan," Haymes had said. Comets had more than once destroyed plans and orbits, when they met . . .

It was very quiet now and Crane was tired out. He felt he was soon to fall asleep, and he was a little afraid of it. He was afraid to close his eyes for long. But he had to try.

"Listen, Doc," Steve's voice yawned to him. "You been keeping that head of yours going so fast that I got to like it. It rocks me to sleep. So don't stop now, or I won't be able to stand it. Here's something to chew on: these llanu are a pretty healthy race; they live to the ripe old age of two thousand years. They'll be around a lot longer than you or Tommy or me. Try that on your merry-go-round."

Crane was wide awake again for the next quarter hour, wondering.

And not until he heard Steve snoring peacefully was his mental meandering halted. He closed his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

The Message From the Grave

CRANE started awake, instantly alert. Standing over him were Steve and Tommy. It was a moment before Crane remembered them. Over their shoulders, from where they stood in the doorway, the first yellow rays of the sun were slanting down cheerfully.

"Nice work," Tommy said to Steve. Both were grinning. Tommy said to Crane, "Come on with us. The nottars are coming back.

Crane shook the sleep that was reclaiming him out of his eyes. His bones ached when he got to his feet, and he groaned audibly.

"Do either of you two Harvard men believe in dreams?" he scowled.

"Let's get going," said Steve. The three moved out of the hut, into the clearing where the low hovels in their dark circle stood all around them. Here and there a nottar walked about, stretching, and pausing the instant he spied the three men to look at them attentively. "Into the forest primeval we go," said Steve.

"Into the forest phony, you mean," said Tommy.

"Phony or not," said Steve, "we've got to find it today, even if we have to kill a nottar to do it. We've been here three days already, and if we stay any longer, some wandering llanu may take a peep into the dark blanks that these nottars have for minds, and they'll see some of that slow suspicion that these babies are eyeing us with."

Every nottar that was about was looking at them as they left the settlement and were swallowed up in the woods.

"See that one over there?" said Tommy. "He's thinking that it's funny - we go out to hunt early every morning, stay out all day, and come back at night to mooch boranny meat from the others. He doesn't think we're much good."

"He thinks the Doc is good, though," said Steve. "When I hooked him he

was racking his head thinking about howcome he's still alive. Just let some llanu tune in on that. They'll call out Haymes' boys."

The three men were walking deeper into the forest, saying nothing. Crane looked about at the trees in an endeavor to see how they differed from Earthly or interplanetary trees. Outside of a preponderance of seemingly pre-historic specimens, the kind that were found petrified on Earth, or still blossoming on dozens of other heavenly bodies, he could see no difference. He even identified what he thought was an oak.

"You were saying a while back," said Steve, conversationally, "something about me believing in dreams. The answer is, I do. Especially when I've made 'em. Didn't you have a dream about a four-headed dragon with space-ships for teeth about to take a bite out of you?"

Walking alongside of Steve, Crane nodded.

"Well, that was me," said Steve. "Tommy and I play like that. That's the way we wake each other up. First one up whispers a dream into the other's ear. I got Tommy this morning and then you. Like it?"

"You mean you telepathized a dream while I was asleep?" said Crane.

"Yeah," Tommy chuckled. "Or else you'd still be sleeping. I tell you this telepathy business has more angles..."

Steve smiled meagerly.

"We'd knock 'em dead back home," he said.

"Dead is the right word," Crane agreed.

THEY walked a bit farther and then Tommy pointed to a spot ahead where three huge trees stood close together.

"About here, I think," he said. Steve nodded and turned to Crane.

"Doc," he said. "We're going to hunt for something. I'll outline it briefly. The guy ahead of you in that settlement, Doc Bell, was supposed to be a queer egg. He got more out of the rebel llanu than any of us. We had word a few weeks ago that he had eavesdropped a conversation that gave him a clue to escaping from this planet. A traveler, like us, named Abe was in at the laboratory, and he told us.

"It seems Doc Bell was up before the Tribunal of the llanu, and they questioned him. Abe was there as a bikko and he and the Doc got together for half a minute. They turned Bell over to Haymes, but Abe got away. He said the Doc told him he was part of a chain, and the results of that chain was buried in the nottar's holy graveyard."

"What do you mean—chain?" said Crane.

"Just think the questions," said Steve. "I'll get to them all. The chain is a system that has been going on for over a hundred years, usually among doctors. Whenever a man found something worth recording, and which he wanted to pass on to his successor when his time was up, he left it in the nottar's graveyard. He figured that any doctor who was around for any length of time would eventually get to the graveyard. Whenever a nottar is accidentally killed by the Raie, they bury him in a secret place that is holy to them. Not even a llana can get the nottars to show them where it is, and if anybody is watching them, they don't go to it.

"The doctors figured that they were the only ones trusted by the nottars, so they could get to the graveyard. And they knew that if any other doctor got there, the chances were he would examine the bodies there. Sort of a

professional touch, you see. So they hid the information in the graveyards, where they'd be safe.

"The only hitch in the scheme was this: when a doctor knew about it, the llanu could make him tell by driving him to it, where they couldn't drive a nottar because the place was so holy he'd rather die. So every time a chain got started, when the llanu found it out, they'd smash it.

"But this chain seems to have kept on, primarily because one of the pieces of information in it—the first piece, probably, was about telepathy and the whisperers, and how to fight them. So these Docs wouldn't budge, and they kept knocking them off."

"But how did they know when a doctor was in a chain in that case?"

"Easy," said Steve. "They'd try to get him off guard and then shoot a question at him. They'd ask him, like they asked you yesterday, 'What number are you?'. Usually, before the Doc could think better of it, he'd have focused on the answer, if he knew it. I don't know what number you are, but if there were five ahead of you, then you'd be number six. And the only way you could ever know that answer was if you had uncovered a chain. And they fear the chains more than most things.

"They got Bell up before the Tribunal when he gave out his number. Fortunately, Abe was there. He told us all Bell could get out to him. It was that his chain had a way of escape. Also, that the nottar's graveyard here was marked by a flat black slab of stone which covered it.

"That's what we're hunting. We've been through this forest up to about here. We're going to scatter now and look some more. If we don't come across it by night, Tommy has some nice blue powder to sprinkle on a nottar. It wouldn't have done much good before, because if one of us had sprinkled it, they'd never let us near the graveyard when the nottar was killed by Raie. But they'd let you come.

"Every minute counts. Let's scatter now. Keep in touch by talking up now and then, and keep your eyes open. We don't know what this may mean." His voice fell. "We don't know whether this is the answer. It may be. And there's something here—" he tapped his chest—"that says yes."

THAT same something was beating wildly in Crane's chest when they moved apart. Under the bantering tone that Steve had used he had heard the undercurrent of deadly seriousness. These two, Tommy and Steve, had taken their lives in their hands to come here and hunt.

Every moment was fraught with danger, and was the more dangerous because a tiny oversight would lose, perhaps forever, the clues that these men had been gathering for years, trying to find salvation. It was salvation not for them, he knew, not so much for themselves at all, but for those others who as yet knew nothing of this hidden world of the llanu, and the fate that lay in store for them. It was a fate that Crane could hardly grasp.

Steve had said the world was at stake. It was too huge a concept to swallow all at once. Suddenly he remembered another of Haymes' phrases, when he had said: "...we are not the freebooters of another age. Our prize is an exceptional one..." The fate of a world...in so few hands... the hand of men...

From time to time he kept calling out, keeping within sound of both his companions. They were going deeper into the forest, combing it with care, each man's eyes intent on what lay

about him.

The sun had mounted high in the heavens when they met again. There was a well, or rather, a drinking station, and they gathered around it. The drinking station was one provided for hunting nottars.

"We'll have to move faster. The place is getting filled with those savages; I heard a few before," said Tommy. His lean face was perspiring, and his cheekbones glistened darkly where a stray ray of sunlight came through the trees to play about his head.

Crane drank his fill. "Is this where the nottars hunt the boranny?" he asked. "I haven't seen any at all."

"That's because you haven't been bred for a century to see them," said Steve, ruefully. "Let's be moving again."

An hour later, Crane let out a yell.

"You shouldn't have shouted," said Steve, his eyes burning, staring down at a flat black stone that was covered over with uprooted vegetation. It was perhaps fifteen feet square, and some three inches thick. "If the nottars come across us now..." Steve left the sentence unfinished.

They were pushing away at one corner of the stone, trying to move enough of it to allow one man to go in. Slowly the back-breaking work told. The slab moved away inch by inch, revealing the pit which it covered. They struggled with it until there was a hole two feet wide.

Without pausing for breath, Tommy lowered himself feet first into the pit. They could hear him falling heavily below. The stench of decaying bodies came to them, foul and revolting, but neither Crane nor Steve would budge. Once Steve murmured,

"You brought us luck, Doc." For the rest of the quarter hour they waited there, neither spoke.

And then Tommy was below them again.

"Got it."

Steve lowered one foot down below, Crane holding on to him. They had Tommy out of the pit in short order. He was holding a rolled bundle of cloth in his hands. He sat down on the slab and unrolled it. There were tiny crude letters written all over what had once been a surgeon's tunic. "Written in blood," said Crane. The letters were a faded brown.

Tommy kept unrolling the bundle, his eyes blazing.

"Routine stuff up to here," he said, pointing. Steve looked. "But this, from here on..."

THEY were reading it. Tommy kept shaking his head, saying,

"What does he mean about the connection of Ilanu and Raie. And this about Amanas coming into the solar system about two hundred years ago?"

Steve didn't know. All he said once, to Crane, was,

"You're number 24 in a long line of brilliant men, Doc."

Twenty-four. Through the years they had written in their blood, compiling their vague encyclopedia, passing it on from man to man, fighting alone on a strange world, fighting for others. Crane was hearing voices from the grave, but not the grave of a savagely degenerated mankind like the nottars.

"Lord!" Steve breathed. His face was greyish slate-colored, his eyes bloodshot. "They're moving closer every day, and there aren't many days left... The deserted white city..." He was mumbling as he read.

Tommy began rolling up the bundle of cloth.

"We've got enough to act on," he

said. "You take Doc and make it to the white city. I'll go out for Harvey myself. We ought to make it in three days."

"Put the bundle back inside," said Steve, grimly. "There's a slight chance we might not make it." He held out a restraining hand. "Never mind," he said. "If we don't make it, it won't make any difference. There won't be anybody to read it."

The next instant he had wheeled around, and was standing beside Crane and Tommy. All three were facing a llana!

The winged giant towered over them, holding out a hand.

"Give it to me," he said, orally. "This is forbidden."

"Not on your life." Steve had taken a deep breath and answered. "If you try to take it away from us we'll fight. You'll have to kill one of us at least. Even if you are an Oran, that's taboo."

Tommy said,

"I'll be going now."

Steve said,

"Stick around a minute. What's he doing?"

Crane watched the llana, the Oran who had first befriended him, as he looked out into the forest. His brow had clouded, and his hands were tightly holding the edges of his immense white wings.

"Calling the nottars — that's what he's doing!" Tommy cried.

The llana looked at Crane.

"I helped you. I tried to save your life. Is this the way you repay me? You must be patient, and go the way of peace. Oran is your friend."

"Talk to his lawyer," said Steve, between his teeth. "You rebels are a lot of talk. Patience, huh? What will you do for us after they've gone down and—" he stopped—"Let's get the hell out of here!" he said.

He led the way and Crane and Tommy followed, running after him at a fast lope. And from behind them, from Oran, each man heard in his mind the words, *"Your action will result in the death of every man on Amanas."*

"He knows what we found out, Tommy panted. "Now we're really in for it. They'll wipe out everybody they can put their hands on."

"We've got to get Harvey before then," Steve answered as he ran.

"How?"

"About an hour from now . . . when the ses come . . . take two."

Tommy stopped dead in his tracks. Half a dozen nottars directly ahead of them were running sullenly at them. Tommy slipped a hand under his loin cloth, to where a little bag hung strapped to his naked back. He opened the bag and dipped his hand in. The first nottar to approach them got a handful of blue powder right in his eyes. The second had his face smeared with it by Tommy. The third ducked and howled. In a moment they were all shrieking as they saw the blue powder on two of their number.

The three men were running again. No one came near them . . .

THE settlement was deserted when they reached it. The whole forest was ringing with the terrified crying of the nottars. In front of one hut were several dead boranny, untouched.

"Bad news travels fast even here," Tommy grunted. "Doc, you get that black bag of yours. It might come in handy. And lend me a knife or a scalpel or something. I'll skin these boranny while we're waiting."

"What are we waiting for?" said Crane.

"Afternoon tea," said Steve. "Didn't you know?"

"It better be good," Crane said. "I'm

very fussy about my tea."

He brought out the black bag and watched Tommy expertly skin the dead boranny.

"Was nice having a fire for a couple of nights," Tommy said. "That roof made possible the only cooked food we've had in weeks."

"Yeah," Steve nodded. "Traveling accommodations here are lousy."

Crane could feel the tension creeping up his spine. He joined in the light conversation, thankful for it. Every moment they sat there, they were sitting on the edge of a volcano. Would Haymes' men be sent out to seek them?

"One question at a time," said Tommy, peeling off a layer of skin. "Now what's that big one about the chlorophyl that's been eating you?"

Crane grinned.

"It isn't safe with you two around. I'm glad now I led such a clean life. About the chlorophyl, I've been wondering why, if it poisons the Raie, how they can do any harm on Earth."

"How much chlorophyl do you think there is in a city like York?" said Steve. "As for the rest, suppose everybody runs away to the countryside. That would drive the Raie into doing what they did last night. You think death is much worse than what could happen in that event?"

"No," said Crane, shuddering.

"You know," said Tommy, "they plan on going down to Earth pretty soon? About 1800 hours from April 10, according to our way of measuring time. The days here are thirty hours long. That means we've about a week, at the outside."

"What could we do?" Crane was beginning to glimpse their plans. The talk about escape from Amanas couldn't mean much without further plans.

"We'd have at least a few weeks—" he broke off—"hello—tea!"

Crane looked up and saw what they had been waiting for. The saucers laden with food for the nottars were descending over the center of the settlement. The bikko in them were leaning over the sides, throwing the food down from their perch ten feet over the ground.

"Look at them," said Steve sourly. "Wasting that perfectly awful food, without giving a damn whether there's anyone around to eat it."

"Which of those ses do we go for?" said Tommy.

Steve pointed a finger at a vessel manned by two bikko, hovering near them. Both men went to a point near its clear edge. Steve clasped his hands, forming a step. Tommy lifted a naked foot into the step, Steve heaved up, and Tommy shot up into the air, grasping one end of the vessel. Before he could climb over the edge he was seen. One of the bikko swung over and began to hammer his hands. The other calmly began to manipulate the machine. The vessel started to spin, faster and faster, and Tommy's body was coming up horizontally as he refused to let go.

The vessel was not only spinning. It was moving along over the huts. Snatches of Tommy's yelling came out; he was swearing a blue streak. Steve looked on helplessly, then spotted Crane and began to follow suit. Crane was climbing up on the roof of his hovel. The vessel was quickly coming near it.

The bikko saw too late the two men on the roof. Crane broad-jumped right into the center. He reached out for the nearest throat of the two bikko, got it, and held on until the vessel stopped spinning. Then he swung around and smashed his fist into the other shaven-head's face. The bikko took the punch like a sack stuffed with

paper. He spun around and fell out of the vessel, hit the roof, rolled down, hit the ground, got up, fell down dizzily, got up again and began running.

And then Crane was laughing until he had to sit down. Steve was leaning over the side, pummeling Tommy as he tried to climb up. All three of them were laughing, but Tommy least of all. When Steve let up and Tommy finally climbed in, all he said was,

"Good thing I didn't eat."

CRANE looked around. The other vessels were still calmly discharging their food, as if nothing had happened.

"How's that for discipline?" said Steve. "Once they get orders, they stick to 'em. The only departure is in an emergency, when someone tries to take the ses away. Nice trick."

Tommy was playing with the knobs that controlled the vessel. It began to move closer to the others.

"I don't know how Steve and I got along without you, Doc. You're a great help."

"Thanks," said Crane. "I like you boys too."

"Go ahead, Doc," said Steve. "I want to see that left hook again."

Tommy moved the vessel alongside another. Crane stood up and carefully stepped over. He held the bikko by the collar of his robe for a moment, hit him, and sat him down. The saucer was starting to spin, but Crane reached out, grabbed the other, jabbed his left arm forward. Then Steve crossed over.

"Ever do any amateur boxing?" he asked, working the controls to ease the vessel to the ground.

"A little, in the army," said Crane. He helped Steve roll out the bodies of the still dazed bikko. They rose again beside Tommy.

Tommy held out his hand.

"This may be good-bye," he was saying. He had a grin on his face, but somehow it was crooked and his voice had a huskiness in it. "I'm taking half the lilacs," he said, "although with little boy blue with you, you ought to get at least two-thirds."

"So long," said Steve, holding Tommy's hand. "Be careful."

"Nice to have known you, Tommy," said Crane. "See you soon." His eyes were glistening and he felt choked up inside.

"Three days," said Tommy, turning away. "June 11."

As the two vessels began to separate, Steve yelled, "See if you can find a couple of girls for me and Doc, will you?"

Tommy made a face and answered, but he was too far away.

The little saucer-like ships were drawing farther and farther apart. In a while, they were out of sight of each other . . .

CHAPTER VII

The Mission of the Solitary C

JUNE 11, 2770 was a day long remembered.

It was a Monday, and that in part accounted for the way in which the avalanche started, for people of all nations had gone peacefully out to their daily tasks early in the morning, and that at first kept them from hearing everything all at once. But the avalanche, slow to start, became impossible to stop once it had begun.

It came roaring down suddenly, and smash—all at once—the reckoning of centuries, long overdue, claiming its own . . .

The day had come, bringing with it a bleak, cold rain and an unseasonal

chill. Millions who might otherwise have been outdoors were confined to their homes, and that was another factor.

At first, people were inclined to regard what came over their Audipress attachments to the visiscopes as entertainment. In bad taste, of course, and rather juvenile thriller entertainment . . . and disconcerting. But little by little, as it continued, the first few calls that went to Audipress headquarters were unanswered. That was a mistake. People began to call friends, and the friends called others.

The really alarming feature of the newscast—hardly news—came when it ended. Then, instead of one of the personable staff of Audipress showing his face on the screen, the screen went blank. And a voice, just a voice, without any face at all, said things no thriller should say:

"What you have just seen and heard is no play. This is a stolen record of fact. It is not coming to you via Audipress. We are blocking the regular channels of Audipress to show to the citizens of America the appalling news that has been kept from them. You have only to dial the press nearest you for confirmation."

That was all, at first. It should have been obvious to those who called that no agency could have handled so many calls at once. Perhaps they had no idea of how many of them were quietly calling. And then there was a short flash on the visiscope screens and they lit up again, and there was the familiar face of a newscaster. He asked for a discontinuation of the calls, smiled at people's alarm at a harmless experimental story, and began to speak of news of the day.

At that moment his image faded. The screen blanked out again. The voice that had spoken before was heard again.

"We have cut in again. We will continue to block the regular wavelength as long as we remain undiscovered. There is a human duty to perform. Courageous men have undertaken that work all over the world, simultaneously, from many hidden stations. Look at the screen. You cannot doubt the authenticity of the record. These are no actors. Demand to know the full truth!"

The cast that had first been on was repeated. It brought out two facts. First, that it was a record of some sort being cast, for every minute motion, each tiny detail was repeated exactly. Second, there was no doubt that the screen was showing no actors. By some horrible twist of irony, Commander Scott, out of the many men whom it might have been, was the least able to be doubled. That little man, stooped and thin, with his large, irregular skull and the lean hawk's face — where would there be a double?

A small issue, that. But it settled things. People were looking for some small flaw to reassure themselves, to find some reason to laugh. But there was no flaw, down to the tiniest detail. They had to believe.

IT was not a play. It was true, all of it. And people were all this while calling others, or calling Audipress and getting no response. Those who had high-powered sets tuned in other continents and got the same thing in many languages, the translation following softly after the English, for those to whom international English was still a bit awkward.

Things about duplicates of ships . . . people missing . . . insurance —and Commander Scott was saying them, saying them all to a strong-faced, earnest young man because it had been

found politic to tell him! Him, and so few others, the wearers of the red field!

"The day they find out will be a sad day indeed . . ."

Scott said that, his gloved hands playing with a snuff box.

And the hospital, and all those people in it, the doctors, the talk of Haymes, long-forgotten Haymes, and the Flambeau . . . and the danger was coming closer, closer — and no one knew what it was . . ." "how really close the danger appears to be . . . " and the part where Scott said, " . . . these we fear more than any, the misguided saviors . . . "

A voice broke in later to say,

"We are the misguided saviors, the men who have not hesitated to publish the whole truth, telling our fellow men of things shrouded in secrecy, demanding the end of involuntary sacrifice!"

It kept up that way all afternoon, with the record going on over and over and over, and the voice growing louder. And all over the world a fear-stricken humanity poured forth from its work, to stand and look at the heavens and wonder. Night or day, it made little difference. There was terror in the depths of the sky, and where people had been asleep, there was no more sleep. People were calling, calling, calling—and getting no answers. That was what drove them crazy. And when the whole southwest in America stopped getting the cast right in the middle, with not a word from Audipress, not a word, even of denial . . .

One by one the casts were blacked out. There were people who heard military sirens going in the sky, seeing fleets scattering to hunt. And the casts went out one by one, all over the world.

In Omaha, thousands marched to the city hall. They touched off a spark that meant a common and simultaneous explosion. They were starting to march everywhere when Audipress, almost at dusk, responded to subscribers.

Commander Scott appeared on the screen. His gloved hands held a paper from which he read a statement. He said a few words. He asked for order; he promised full explanations would be forthcoming. What had happened was a calamity, the engineering of a small group of men whose purpose it was to reduce defensive forces to helplessness. And he requested all citizens to await further developments peacefully.

Peacefully? What they wanted was a denial—a complete denial! Even though they would never have believed it. They knew the truth, knew it was past denying, but they wanted it. Explanations and talk of a small group of conspirators was nothing. And when word got out later that the ship mentioned in that film record, the combat ship to investigate the flimsy, meaningless clue of the call from a Kimball Crane—that the ship had actually left two days before, it was nothing. It made no difference.

In York, the huge square where Military Intelligence stood among the M.I. buildings, a great, horrible, squirming mass of humans descended and surged forward in aimless waves, overpowering guards, smashing everything.

In Washington, two regiments held back the black sea of maddened people, and they fired once straight ahead to keep them from the White House. In Frisco, in Buenos Aires, Sydney, Cairo, London, Warsaw, Bombay, Yokohama . . . stark, staring crazy . . .

"Orders have gone out," said Audipress, "to all vessels to proceed only with volunteer crews. The full strength of the Interplanetary Military has been mobilized and is on guard. There is no immediate danger."

No one was listening or believing

anymore.

At midnight on the American continents, a dozen cities were in flames, and others were going, all over the world.

CAPTAIN Andrews stood on the rostrum of the combat ship, the *Solitary C*, in the crew assembly room. It was the largest single chamber aboard the vessel, yet the thirty odd men that had gathered there were crowded next to each other. Silently, the captain looked at the men of his command, his eyes pausing at the red field that encircled a service star on the uniforms of every man present. But for that red field he knew nothing about them, save perhaps young Lieutenant Rafferty, whom he had such a short time before found it necessary to discipline. It seemed a long time.

The captain had been speaking for almost ten minutes before he had stopped. Now he cleared his throat and pulled on his little mustache, the mustache that would twitch involuntarily whenever he was moved. He looked for a fleeting instant at Rafferty, then at Lieutenant Anthony Brown, and as he looked at both men, his eyes grew smaller and finally moved on.

"That's the way things are at home," Captain Andrews said, presently. "I've told you everything Headquarters sent over the etherphones. The whole thing has blown up. Our duty, whatever value it may have, seems more clear than ever. We were ordered almost three days ago to a rendezvous, alone of Patrol 81, and we are now almost at our destination. That it may prove dangerous you know fully as well as I do; your red fields prove that. One thing more. M. I. has ordered that we proceed only with volunteer crew members. In view of the information which I have given you, every one of you is at liberty to request release. I will wait for your decisions."

The captain turned on his heel, left the rostrum and exited from the assembly room.

A quarter of an hour later, Lieutenant Rafferty walked into the captain's cabin.

"The list of those who wish to resign, sir," he said. He laid a folded sheet of paper on the Captain's desk.

Andrews nodded, picked up the sheet, studied it briefly. Quietly, without looking up, he said,

"We've come a long way in these few days, haven't we, Lieutenant? Funny the way things worked out. The lad with too much vitamins being here with me now." He brushed a hand across his forehead. "The way it must have come — smashed into a billion pieces. Where will it all end?" He opened the sheet again. "I'll say this while I've a mind to, Rafferty. I got my red field in my first year too. I was glad to take active command again, and I'm glad you're with me on the *Solitary C*."

The next moment he laughed dryly.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to the sheet of paper.

Rafferty looked. There was one name: Lieutenant Anthony Brown.

Rafferty said,

"Does this mean we must return to an outpost and allow Lieutenant Brown to leave the ship?"

The intercommunications phone piped twice.

"Observation reporting. Steinberg needle behaving erratically. Nothing visible."

The captain pressed down one of the ivory buttons on his desk, picked up his phone.

"Check with the chief engineer and report back." He juggled the horizon-

tal bar and pressed down another button. "Communications. Captain Andrews. Request Lieutenant Brown to come to my cabin, please." He laid down the phone.

"No, Rafferty," said the captain. "It doesn't mean that at all—in this particular instance. It would be unfortunate for the record of this ship if it had to return, being so near its ordered rendezvous." He lapsed into silence again.

A FEW moments later, Lieutenant Brown entered. He saluted and stood at attention. The captain eyed him, soberly.

"Mr. Brown, are you aware that you alone of this whole crew has asked to be relieved?"

"I am now, sir."

"You have, of course, excellent reasons for your request?"

"I have, sir."

"Would it be too much for you to tell me something about it?"

"I am under no compulsion to divulge personal affairs, sir."

The captain nodded.

"Correct, Lieutenant. At the same time, I find I must tell you that your request cannot be honored."

Brown stood quietly a moment. Then he said,

"The orders were to be enforced without exception, sir. I must insist on my rights."

"You have no rights, Lieutenant," said Andrews, slowly. "I see that your post at Communications has been educational. You seem to have de-ciphered even my orders. Were you a bit puzzled when that other message came in some ten minutes ago? Odd code, wasn't it? A very private code, Mr. Brown—orders from H. Q. to the commanding officer, alone." Brown didn't budge as the captain added, "Those orders were for your arrest, Mr. Brown."

"I don't understand, sir." Brown's large figure shifted ground.

"I don't either—yet. Not entirely. Although it seems you have—"

The intercommunications phone piped twice, interrupting.

"Observation reporting. Chief Masters speaking. Steinberg needle denotes presence of a vessel in the vicinity. Impossible to verify by sight."

"That's odd," said Captain Andrews. He started to rise from—

The *Solitary C* heeled over as if her sides had smashed against a great wall. The lights went out. The deafening thunder of bolts pounding the armor of the vessel came just as the ship went into a dive. A wall gave way and suddenly it was hot inside the room, the air scorching.

Rafferty, hurled against one of the walls, saw Captain Andrews as the emergency light flickered on and then off. The captain was near him, pinned to a wall as well as Brown.

"Rafferty!" the captain shouted above the din, "Rafferty! What the hell!" The look on his face had been queer. It was just that he didn't know, really, what to do. His voice came from the darkness. "Attacked—bolts and heat guns!"

The artificial gravity of the ship was gone, and Rafferty felt himself pinioned against the walls by the force of the ship's descent. At least it felt like descent, like free fall. On all fours he made his way to a porthole. There was nothing to be seen. The velvet black of space was gone. They were whirling through a greyish, curling mist.

It was then that a golden figure flitted through a wall and went close to Rafferty, spinning in a wild motion. Over the deep, terrible sound of agony

that shook the very structure of the ship and the screaming of men, Rafferty heard Brown's voice, shouting something.

From near at hand a greenish light began to glow, a beam as thin as a pencil, aimed directly at the golden figure.

In the last moments of consciousness, hardly knowing what he saw or heard, Rafferty rolled across the floor, fighting for every inch. His last motion was to reach the safety valve, opening the compressed air jets to cushion the landing of the disabled, stricken vessel . . .

CHAPTER VIII

"Keep Fighting!"

THE morning of June 11, as Steve calculated time, found Kimball Crane and Steve scudding over the ground in their ses, moving swiftly over the wind swept fields some ten feet under them. Both men were haggard, their faces lined with fatigue. They sat slumped in the shallow vessel, their eyes fixed on the horizon, where the early sun had smashed in all its brilliance on a white city in the distance.

Once Crane pointed behind. There was a ses—it might have been a distant bird—flying behind them. Half an hour later, when Steve looked again, it was closer. And it was a ses. It kept gaining on them bit by bit—until Steve suddenly exclaimed and turned his own vessel about.

Tommy was in the other ses. They could make out his waving arms, and his voice came faintly with the wind.

The two vessels approached each other with increasing speed. They met in mid-air, hovering. Tommy said,

"Follow me."

He twisted his vessel in an arc and Steve followed. Both were moving at a right angle to the direction in which Crane and Steve had been moving.

Tommy looked as if he were ready to faint away at any minute. From between lips that were swollen with thirst he managed to make himself heard. Unlike Steve, whose face had become covered with hair when it was no longer necessary to hold the guise of a nottar, Tommy's face was clean-shaven. And in the vessel beside him lay a bundle of blue cloth. He said,

"There's been a round-up. Harvey's been taken to the Tribunal. I went there and got in as a bikko. They caught me. I got away."

It was difficult for him to speak. He breathed heavily for some time and then, moving his ses closer still, he said,

"The white cloth fell out of my robe . . . gave me away. They've got it. Came after you. Was at the white city yesterday, looked for you there and on the way. Too dark . . . missed you. Scouting around now when I saw you. Must get Harvey out . . .

"Hungry?" said Steve.

"Forgot to take along the boranny meat," Tommy smiled.

"We did too. But Crane and I got a couple yesterday." Steve passed Tommy the remains of the meat. "There isn't much left."

"You never leave much," said Tommy. "Had no time to hunt. Had to find you. No time to eat or sleep or anything. No time left." He was chewing savagely on the cold meat, gnawing the bones. "I've been to the white city and I saw what was there. Just a few days left at most. They're getting ready to move.

"Don't bother speaking," said Crane.

Tommy grinned again.

"Easier to speak than think the words across. If we get Harvey we

have a chance.

"What did you see there? I mean in the white city," said Steve.

"Drive you crazy."

"We're crazy anyway to try to get Harvey out," said Steve.

Tommy shook his head.

"Haymes isn't around. Gone somewhere. None of his men around, either. Must get Harvey. Doc Bell was on the right track. Crane knows all about it?"

"Yeah, Doc knows." Steve stopped and pointed ahead. The walls of a city of rose and gold stood on the horizon. "Doc and I have been doing nothing but talking for two whole days and nights. What's this about what you saw in the white city?"

"Keep your mind on Harvey," said Tommy. "Won't matter otherwise."

THE rose and gold on the horizon was speeding toward them. Some time later they made out a ses high above, carrying several people. Then there were others. Tommy pointed to them and said.

"Round-up."

Once Crane asked,

"This is the city where they keep the female *llanu?*"

Steve started to smile, then answered laconically.

"Yeah." He added, "Females are a rarity on Amanas. Only the nottars and spregg have any, and we, like the bikko, haven't. Bikko don't have to reproduce, and they don't want any of the normal ones to for very good reasons. But the llanu males seem to outnumber the females a hundred to one."

"I imagine they'd fight a lot over them," said Crane.

Steve laughed shortly.

"You think of the damndest things. No, they don't fight at all. They stay away from them." He looked toward Tommy. "After two days of questions, Doc thinks of these," he grinned.

Tommy smiled back.

"Wait'll he sees those females."

They were by then almost upon the city. The air about them had no less than half a dozen ses yet they were ignoring Crane and his two friends as much as the latter ignored the other craft. Bikko and humans, both intent on their business.

"Listen, Doc," said Steve, all at once. "We're making a flying trip in for Harvey. Follow us and use your hands when we say so."

Crane, hardly knowing what to expect, nodded. They were passing over the first outlying buildings now. They were the first Crane had seen at such close range. They were all either circular or ovaloid, and of varying heights in regular formations, but all of them had a great central opening, a wide, circular shaft that began at the roof and went down the length of the buildings. The lovely rose and gold walls had many circular windows that were open, and here and there Crane saw faces at the windows. But he saw no llanu anywhere. The verdant streets below were empty, and looking down an occasional shaft, Crane saw ses moving in them, but no llanu.

"There aren't more than a million of them, all told," Steve interposed on Crane's thoughts. "The white city's completely deserted."

Ahead, Tommy's vessel came to an abrupt stop, and Steve followed suit. Below them in that marvelously ordered panorama whose colors were like the blending tones of an artist's palette, stood a building with multicolored spires reaching up from the roof that dipped toward its central opening.

As if by a signal, both ses dropped like plummets straight down into the

Crane saw below them a huge building with a central well that went down to a vast depth

shaft. Down they sped through numerous flights, flashing by other vessels. From what Crane could glimpse, the interior reminded him of luxurious hotels on Earth. Most of the levels had no railing along their outer edges; a small curb ended the level and it fell into the shaft. Here and there were great chambers, tapestries. Several llanu walked about, and wheeled to look at them as their ses sang their way down.

Suddenly the ses eased off, stopped, and slid out of the shaft to a level whose edge was marked off by a high metal railing. But the ses did not descend to the floor itself. They hovered in mid-air for a moment.

The level was planned as a series of long halls which moved like radii from the center of the shaft out toward the walls of the circular building. Intersecting these at several places were other halls, complete circles concentric with the shaft, increasing in circumference as they were farther away. The chambers were marked off between these intersections. And the halls themselves were filled with people—humans!

THEY sat about in various positions, clad in diverse ways, entirely silent. Many bikko moved among them, soundlessly.

That was the extent of what Crane saw as his ses began to float down one of these halls filled with humans. More than anything, the silence struck him like a blow. The place was like a bright tomb, the brilliant walls and blue robes of the bikko making a gay picture.

"Harvey! Harvey! Speak up!" The voices of Steve and Tommy were like thunderclaps in the quiet as they shouted. One or two of the bikko were leaping for the edges of their ses. They kept moving down a hall. The humans looked up at them with no curiosity in their eyes.

Crane felt all at once the hopelessness of their situation. He knew they would never leave the place alive. Better to end the useless struggle and resign themselves to an easy death. Memories of the past flitted by in the forlorn faces about him, robbing him of his strength. There was no use. Crane sat idly in the ses and looked at Steve, wondering why they had come. These men had fought for nothing.

"Crane!" Steve shrieked at that instant, his eyes blazing. "Watch out for the whisperers! Don't let 'em get you!"

It was as if Crane heard the words and they made an impression not on his mind, but on another Crane somewhere inside him. A little ball of fire was growing deep inside that other Crane, consuming him, and then consuming the outer Crane. He saw Steve telling him, "There's safety in remembering these words—'Keep Fighting!'"

With the remembrance of the words, the fire had reached Crane's mind and he was suddenly alive again. In a flash he saw the minute panels in the ceiling, and the eyes of llanu peering out. These were the eyes he had been looking at before, without knowing it, and these were the eyes that accounted for the strange stupor that claimed the humans who sat below like cattle—and the eyes that directed the bikko who were now pouring in from all directions.

The ses were moving faster now, and at the next intersection of halls Tommy veered away and proceeded down another, while Steve chose a third. Crane reached over and took the control knobs from Steve's hand.

"You look," he said. "I don't know Harvey." Steve let the knobs go to the hands of Crane without a word. Both men had alternated on those knobs for two days and nights.

And still there was no sound save for Steve's calls, and the dim echoes of Tommy's voice somewhere not far away. The bikko were leaping underneath in crazy, vapid-eyed groups. There was hardly room enough for the ses; when one of them did catch on, he was brushed off by a wall as the ses rocked from one to the other wall. And now there was the sound of the bikko jumping, their feet patting against the floor.

Suddenly a door opened and a llana stood there ahead of them. He came forward rapidly. His giant hands moved up, seized an end of the vessel, and with prodigious strength, moved it down. Half a dozen bikko clambered in, seizing Crane and Steve.

It was hardly a fight, and to make it more simple, it had no sooner begun when Tommy's voice rang out.

"I've got him!"

CRANE, standing on his feet on the floor, had chopped his way past an army of bikko, his arms going like pistons, scattering the bikko like nine-pins. They went down in all directions, to one side, under him, even against Steve who was grunting beside him, likewise hammering down the blue robes that kept running up to them.

Two things stood out in Crane's memory later. One was the way the captive humans who sat on all sides, did not budge. They let themselves be trampled on, fought upon, and would not even flee to safety. They just looked on, vaguely, their eyes troubled, like so many stone figures. The other

was the way the winged giant who had pulled down the ses acted; the same way. He looked on and did nothing when Crane and Steve fought their way past him. One blow from his mighty arm would have settled the whole insane affair. Instead the llana gazed quietly at the scene.

At the intersection a fresh group were waiting, their bare arms sticking out from under blue robes like wrestlers' paws. Heads down, Crane and Steve charged them, plowing through like battering rams. They went through so fast they passed the intersection. Turning about, Crane did a strange thing. He actually paused before he hit another of the shaven-heads—paused so he could be sure of his aim! He was really enjoying the fight!

Back into a radial hall they plowed, Crane and Steve, and at the end, standing against the high metal railing of the shaft, they saw Tommy.

He had his back against the shaft, and he was kicking out with both feet. The floor around him was a maze of blue-covered bodies. Beside him stood a human clothed only in the bottom of a grey tunic. He was using his hands on the bikko with heartening effect.

In a moment the four had joined forces. It was just as well. The bikko were coming on in increasing numbers. Crane felt his knuckles growing raw. Fatigue alone would defeat them unless they could escape. And now Tommy's ses seemed to be gone.

"But it wasn't! It was hovering in the central shaft unattended, and at their level! Tommy yelled, "Give me a lift, Harvey!" The man in grey stooped and boosted Tommy up to the edge of the railing. Tommy gained the top, stood in precarious balance for an instant, and jumped!

The shaft was easily twenty feet across. Tommy had dived at it, and his hands had clutched just one end. His body swung the ses around, got it closer to a wall—the opposite wall of the shaft rail—and he kicked at the rail, propelling the ses across the shaft to where Crane stood waiting.

Something happened then.

Just as Tommy kicked out, his body dangling from the edge of the ses as it had once before in the settlement of the nottars, one of the bikko, lifted from the opposite side of the rail, had reached out and grasped Tommy's leg. He held it for a split instant. In that instant Tommy made a choice.

If he had held on to the ses he might have fought off the bikko who held his leg. And he might not have. He might have remained there long enough, hanging on with his two hands, for the bikko finally to have overcome the three who were tiring of fighting.

Tommy chose instead to let the ses go. His tired eyes met Crane's, and he smiled a brief smile—and he let go!

He hung for a minute face down, held by one foot. The bikko who held him suddenly opened his hand. Tommy disappeared from view. He fell down into the shaft.

For a moment Steve's voice had called once:

"Tommy!" It was a frantic, grief-stricken cry, and the echoes rang down the shaft . . .

Crane leaped to the top of the railing, swung one foot over and seized the ses. He maneuvered it out of the shaft, brought it right over the heads of Steve and Harvey, moved again, and let it drop. It fell with a sickening impact on the bikko around the two men. Swiftly, both had jumped and were in the ses. Crane yanked it back up, into the shaft, and started up. But just as the ses moved into the shaft, Crane glimpsed a huddled figure of a naked body lying at the bottom of the shaft,

two hundred feet below. . . .

The ses kept climbing. It came out of the shaft. It was free again.

Steve pointed a finger.

"Go that way. Don't go near the white city."

HOURS later, toward dusk, the three men rose from where they had hidden themselves in a grassy knoll and climbed into their vessel. Steve spoke again for the first time in all those hours.

"I always ate more than my share," he said. He covered his face with his hands.

After a time Harvey put a hand on Steve's shoulder. Harvey was as tall as Crane, and two mild blue eyes looked out gently from beneath a head that was pure white. Harvey didn't show his strength easily. He showed it now.

"Steve," he said. "The Tribunal halls were filled with men like Tommy. We didn't know them. Tommy gave his life in the hope that there wouldn't be any more men like those. Any one of us would have done the same."

Steve looked up again, out across the horizon. He took the knobs from Crane's hands and turned them.

"The white city is that way," he said. "They won't know now that we've gone there."

Even in the moment of his greatest anguish, Steve had remembered that they had to stay away from the white city until the pursuers had lost them.

Now, as the ses moved swiftly into the gathering dusk, Crane and Harvey spoke. There was no way now of knowing what Tommy had meant when he had referred to the white city. There was no way of knowing what he had discovered there.

They knew only, these three, that one of them was gone. They were resolved that he should not have gone for nothing. "Keep fighting!" he had said in that faint smile, the Tommy who had fought to the last.

There was nothing to mark these men. Perhaps even the Fates who juggled the dice of destiny, had they been near, would have found no reason to pause and consider them.

Nor might they have known, dealers in chance that they were, what the next few throws of the dice would bring. . . .

CHAPTER IX

The Golden Coffin

"THE railing," Harvey was talking softly to Crane, "around the shaft on that level where we were, was designed to keep men from jumping in and killing themselves. They discovered long ago, on the Tribunal level, that it was necessary. Sometimes, while they were leading men from the Judgment halls to be decerebrated, there would come a lucid interval like an awakening, and men would dive into the shaft. The llanu didn't like it."

The time passed more quickly when they spoke. There was nothing to do but sit and talk, and in that way perhaps to stop thinking. Somewhere they had lost the lilacs—the ridiculous lilacs and their weird potency—and it was better not to think about what might happen to them at any moment. So they made conversation.

"Was decerebration a common punishment?" said Crane. They were both speaking of things in a past tense, as if somewhere at that moment it was not happening.

"A defense, more than a punishment. Until yesterday, only those who were discovered as part of a chain, or as possessing lilacs—" Harvey hurried these words — "were brought before the

Tribunal. But yesterday they began to bring in every normal human, no matter what his function, and despite apparent innocence. There must have been a thousand all told. I had been doing valuable work for the llanu as an irrigation engineer, helping them water several new types of trees, like our lombardy poplars and sequoias. They had no real reason to take me in. It was just part of a general round-up. Something big is in the air. Something's about to happen and they were taking no chances."

"That substantiates what Dr. Bell—" Crane began, when Steve, looking over the side, held up a warning hand.

Below them lay the geometrical perfection of a city. Even in the darkness they could see the walls of pure white, their central shafts brilliantly lit, and the light escaping to point like bright fingers at the starry sky. Even at their height, and after Crane's experience in seeing the silent towers of the llanu, there was something more than mere quiet here. More even than the complete desertion that Steve had mentioned. The white city was like the dwelling of death. The radiant lighting only emphasized the utter desolation. What had Tommy found here?

The ses was descending, avoiding the illuminating rays that poured from the center shafts, dodging like a huge bat in darkness.

"Where do we go from here?" said Steve.

He was answered, in part, by the design of the streets below. They seemed to be converging, and Crane motioned to Steve. Steve shrugged.

"I've been here before. There's nothing in the circle." But he kept going ahead, following the pattern of the city.

Suddenly all three men were tense. There was a circle ahead, an immense expanse of grassy terrain with a diameter of half a mile—but there was something else there! The circumference of the circle was marked off by a band of phosphorescent blue that glowed like some huge ring thrown away by a giant.

"We can't stay here!" Harvey whispered. The blue was an invitation to death—

And the ground was moving!

FROM the center of the circle, the ground was shrinking back as if it were swallowing itself, and where the ground moved away there was a black pit without visible depth. Back and back the ground drew itself, shrinking away from the center.

A tiny light glowed deep inside. A white light, and its radiance seemed reflected in gold, shimmered faintly. The light moved. There was an arm holding the light. A human arm.

Silently the ses dropped. Down it went past the level of the ground, and still farther down, and as it dropped, they saw a man all alone, holding the light.

"Abe!" Steve said, trembling.

He looked at them as they dropped down beside him. His eyes were on them as if he were counting their number, but he said not a word save for the single, "Tommy?"

"Gone," said Steve, quietly. "What is this?"

"I found the cloth that Tommy dropped when he went in for Harvey. It said something about a ship being here—a ship men might use. I was at the Tribunal as a bikko, and when they caught me again, I was helped to escape. I came here and found this pit open. It closed after me while I looked around. And now it opened again."

"Tommy must have found it open," said Steve. "But the blue—we're exposed to it. Have you any of the

lilacs?"

"Something better. But don't waste time. With Harvey here we might do something. Look! Tommy must have seen this." Abe stretched a hand out. Halfway out his bare arm stopped. Under the palm of his hand a gold radiance began to form. There was something solid there!

Crane put his hand out. He felt a smooth surface, and as if it were engraved in it, there were little indentations everywhere. But as his hand came into contact with the smooth solidity, a glow came under it. And then Crane saw that the substance was becoming transparent!

Abe had put out the white light that came from a tiny ball in his hand. The only light now came from this gold substance as the hands of four men pressed against it. The light seemed to come from within, and it was as if the gold were thinning, until the wall was no more than a shell.

The gold substance was an immense ball—and inside were llanu!

THEIR faces were old, and they were lying inside as if they were suspended in mid-air. They seemed to cover every available inch of space within that prodigious ball. There must have been five thousand of them.

It was all Crane could do to keep his hand on the sides of the ball as he looked within. It was no more than a huge golden coffin.

"Take your hands off," said Abe. His thin little face and his shaven head were waxen in the glow from the sides. The men took their hands away. The inner light faded. In Abe's hands a tiny white ball glowed again. He stood before them, a small man clad in blue, his eyes bright. "This light is a present from the llanu," he said. Before he could add to what he had said, he looked up. The eyes of the others followed his gaze. The ground was moving together again over their heads!

Abe looked puzzled, but not alarmed. He turned back to the golden ball and held the light over it. The outside was covered with writing, and the writing seemed of many kinds and in a great many distinct sections. The men moved around the ball.

"Sanscrit," said Abe. "Next to it is ancient Greek. Here is a sign language comparable to those used by prehistoric cave men. And here is something like medieval German."

That was what Crane had felt that seemed engraved; the writing. The entire ball was covered with it, if what they saw was representative of the whole, and it seemed to have taken in the complete range of all language. All Earthly language. The thought hit Crane queerly.

"Steve," he said, "is there any signs of the language of the llanu?"

"There may well be," Steve answered softly. "We couldn't cover this in a week. There may be modern English too, but where?" He was intent on the section of medieval German. "I think," Steve said, after a moment, "that I can make some of this out—most of it, in fact."

Abe came closer with the light.

"You can?" he said, eagerly.

Steve nodded.

"I wasted plenty of time in college," he muttered. "They always had their own notions about what an education should consist of, and extinct languages were favorites. Never dreamed I would use it outside of those musty libraries." He was poring over the words, delicately engraved lines in the gold. "Some of those professors were just cracked enough to have looked forward to a situation like this," he mumbled.

"Out with it, man—out with it!" Harvey breathed, tensely. "What do you make of it?" He couldn't understand, as Crane did, that Steve had been mumbling away to hide his feelings, whatever they were.

"Hold on," said Steve. "I'll translate. *Viele jahren* . . . huh . . . here it is." He took a deep breath and began to speak slowly.

"'COUNTLESS ages ago, the Ilanu lived on Earth, a flower evolved from the primeval slime, nurtured into being by a Divinity. They blossomed and covered the world with their cities, for they were even in that early day civilized beyond dreams. They were happy, but their happiness unwisely bred in them an arrogance which was their downfall.

" 'For a time of ice came to destroy them. Walls of ice began to form on the warm bosom that had borne them, and it moved closer to their cities.

" 'But the Ilanu thought to evade the chastisement of the Divinity. They were resolved to survive, and so resolved, they had planned in time to leave the Earth and return to it when the walls of ice had gone.

" 'Whereas before all their energies had been intent on themselves, they turned their eyes out upon the wondrous universe, seeking to bridge the void that lay between them and a haven. They set their engineers to find a way to leave. Then, of all the universe, they found a heavenly body suited in atmosphere and size to their needs. This was the planet Amanas, which was called so because it was a refuge.

" 'They fled then, and saw their cities destroyed, while they waited in other cities prepared for them in advance. But when all the Ilanu had gone, still the ice would not recede quickly. The great experiment began.

" 'It was in answer to the great experiment that the hand of the divinity smote them again.

" 'The Ilanu found that the planet Amanas was not, as they had thought, a fixed member of their universe. It had no fixed orbit at all. It was a wanderer, doomed to stray over the countless planes of Creation, from universe to universe, forever alone. And even then, the lamentation of the Ilanu was tempered by their arrogance. They would answer the Divinity with their great experiment.

" 'Then, for the third time, Divinity struck . . .'

"Lord," Steve said softly. "There's more here, sort of a prayer."

" 'We have wandered eon on eon, age on age. We are sad and humble. We long for the ways of our fathers. We have prayed unceasingly.

" 'Now, returned to Earth, Poros, the end of our sorrow, we know that our prayers have been answered. We give thanks. Life may again go on for us.

" 'Here in this vessel lie Ilanu waiting for peace. They will be the first to obtain it.

" 'Give thanks, reader, to the truth of the Legend, and be humble.' "

Steve's voice stopped then. There was no sound.

After a time Crane said, "This would explain why the vegetation here has been modeled after the Earth. They couldn't actually have grown any of our flora because they had wandered from our solar system. They must have been in dark space for ages sometimes."

"More important," said Abe, "it gives solid body to the stories and legends of the Planeteers. If this planet has gradually been creeping into our system, that would explain why the stories began so long ago. In the beginning, when they were far away, only those

ships which ventured out near them were taken. But as they came closer, more and more ships went by, and they took all those."

"You've left out Haynes," said Harvey. "Where does he come in?"

Steve said suddenly. "What are we standing here for, asking ourselves riddles. Doc Bell said this was a ship. we've got to find out if it is, or maybe whether there's a ship somewhere near here. We're in a place that's been cut off from the outside in some way. It doesn't seem to worry you, Abe. What are you holding back?"

In answer, Abe looked up into the vault of darkness. A fluttering of giant wings came to the men standing there in a tight little group, the sound of the—and there it was! A llana was slowly flying down to them!

WHEN the llana alighted in the glow of the white ball, Crane held his breath. It was a female! She was perhaps eight feet tall; her long blonde hair came over her shoulders in one thick strand. She was clad in a flowing tunic of pure white. Her eyes were soft and dark; her features composed a portrait that was beautiful beyond description; her figure was willowy and supple. She advanced to the men with firm steps, and Abe said, "This is what I was holding back. I promised not to mention her unless she revealed herself. Thela helped me escape from the Tribunal. She brought me here and gave me the white light. And it was she who closed the opening above as she guarded me from the Raie."

The beautiful Thela looked down at the men, her eyes searching their faces.

"Do you mean to help us?" said Steve.

There was silence for a moment. Steve said, "We do not all know your language. It would be better if we spoke in mine."

Then Crane heard the words, or knew them, as they were focused on his brain, and he knew that the llana was telepathising.

"In the morning I will help you to take this golden coffin. It will bear you to your native Earth. I do this not for you, but for the soul of the llanu."

"Why should we believe that you will do what no other llana would?"

"Many would, if they knew what I do. I am one of the few who knows that this coffin must leave within a few days. My father was one of those who built it. If you do not believe me I must get others."

"There are no others," said Steve. "Why must we wait until morning?"

"No others? . . . Then you must believe me. Unless this coffin leaves Amanas, chaos and death will come to your world. You must wait until morning for only then are the attendant Raie still for a time."

"Why do you call this a coffin? What does this all mean?"

"Have you not read the inscriptions? Do you not understand them?"

"No. We know only your origins. We know that you plan to re-take the Earth —Poros, the end of sorrow."

"There is so much you do not know. It is difficult for me to speak in your language. Listen to me in my own words. The Raie of the living llanu in this golden coffin are even now with our priests."

AFTER that, while Steve stood with his eyes closed, and his body swaying from time to time, Crane heard nothing. Once, when Crane brushed up against Steve, he felt the other's body in a feverish tremor. He himself was lost in thought. The llana had said that there were *living* llanu in what she had repeatedly called a coffin! What

meaning was there that escaped Crane? What was she telling Steve? Why was she there at all?

The silence continued warm and vibrant.

Suddenly the ground trembled so violently that the little glowing ball in Abe's hands fell from his grasp. It lay at their feet and outlined the men who stood there, poised and tense, as still as statues. Crane saw Steve open his eyes and stare steadfastly at the llana. Then he turned and said.

"She says a military ship has fallen to the ground near here. Haymes left some time ago to go up for it. There was one of his men aboard, armed with a green ray."

"If what I heard her tell you is true," Abe cried out, "we've got to get to that ship and get it! Her answer is only half of it!"

Steve turned back to the llana. Then he said,

"She won't let us go. We might not return, and there would be no one to take away this coffin."

"I'll stay," said Harvey suddenly. "I'm the engineer here. If it means so much, I'll take it away myself."

A moment later Steve said. "It's all right. Harvey, if we aren't back by the time the sun reaches down past the opening to this pit—leave! You, Abe, stay with him. You're the only one beside me who knows the whole story, and you've got to get back. The Doc and I are going."

Crane was already waiting in the ses when Steve jumped in. They waved good-bye in the sharp white light, looking unreal as they ascended, half of them distinct, the other half cloaked in shadow. High above them the wings of the llana guided them.

The ses paused momentarily and the ground opened up above. Then they were through . . .

THERE was someone moving near Rafferty. He had been listening for minutes, not knowing whether to trust his ears. Unable to penetrate an inch of the pitch black night that surrounded him, not knowing whether it was night or whether he had been blinded—through the roaring in his mind, and the lashes of pain that swept over him, he had been listening to that still sound. Someone moving.

"Rafferty." Andrews' voice. "What happened?"

Rafferty didn't answer. His head was reeling again. He slumped back against something solid behind him, and he knew nothing more . . .

There was someone shaking him. His eyes opened. A minute might have passed since he had last opened them, for he was not blind—but no, there was grey light coming into the ship, through gaps in the torn hull of the vessel. But he felt no pain. He gave up thinking about it, and his sight brought a figure into focus. Andrews again.

"Rafferty, do you hear me?"

He tried to nod his head, didn't know if he had.

"Listen," said Andrews. The sound of a radium torch came to them, eating into the metal of the ship. "Whoever it was," said Andrews, whispering, "they're coming in. I heard the torches an hour ago."

Judd Rafferty moved his lips, and slowly he forced sound out of them.

"How many of the crew are alive?" he asked.

"I don't know. My right leg's broken. Those air valves saved us. Maybe they saved others. I think we struck the aft side first. We seem to be tilted."

Rafferty was pressed close to a wall. One of the chairs had broken loose and lay nearby; the desk hung by a hair. The nose of the ship was up in the air,

tilted away from them. The torches had stopped all at once.

They could hear steps ringing inside the ship. The sounds were coming closer. Someone at the door. Rafferty saw two men come in, walking on the sloping floor with difficulty in spite of the heavy magnetic shoes they wore to keep their balance. They wore dark coveralls with no insignia, and they were armed with heat pistols. They looked at the two men who were lying on the floor, then moved to a third—Lieutenant Brown, who lay in a heap under the desk, out of sight.

"Dead," one of the men grunted, presently. "Head's half off." There was a tiny pool of blood that neither Rafferty nor Andrews had noticed. It had trickled down the sloped deck to clot against a wall.

"All right," said the other. "Get the tube. And see whether these two over here have any guns."

"They'd have used them if they had them," said the first, dryly. He stood up from his stooped position.

"All right." He was holding a long, smallish tube that glinted silvery. "Give it to 'em."

Rafferty closed his eyes. He knew there might be a look in them to betray the man in dirty white who had sneaked up and was now at the door, his fingers to his lips. It was Andrews who gave it away.

BEFORE the men had half turned around, the man in the doorway had leaped down the slope from his elevated perch. He smashed into the nearer of the two men, and then both of them had rolled down and overthrown the second one. But he couldn't knock them off their feet for long. Whichever way they fell, the magnetic shoes kept straining to lift them erect again. The man in white was pounding away at both, struggling to keep their hands from their holstered weapons. And then Rafferty dragged himself over and took a hand.

One of the men in coveralls fell near Andrews, and Andrews grabbed for the man's arms. He held him for a fraction of a second, then let go and tumbled away. The air sang and grew hot and a tiny hole appeared in the chest of the man in coveralls. It sang again and after that the sounds of the struggle stopped. The second man let his arms go limp and he lay on the floor grotesquely, his feet standing, and he curled over.

Steve stood in the doorway, a heat gun in his hand.

"Hated to spoil your fun, Doc," he said, "but time's short. If we'd bothered to look on the other side where these boys landed, we'd have seen their ses."

"Who are you two?" said Rafferty, from where he sat.

"He's Steve," said Crane. "I'm Kimball Crane."

Rafferty's eyes misted, and he brushed a hand across them.

"Hello, Crane," he said, softly. "I got that first message you sent. Second one too." He couldn't control his voice.

Crane rose to his feet. Rafferty's words had moved him. This moment, out of all the tangled ends of their lives, had meaning. The drama of two meaningless lives had come together, and though as yet they were not fully aware of its importance, it was not lost on them; and that gave it meaning.

Steve said abruptly, "Save your questions, gentlemen. If we don't hurry, there may be no use giving you any answers. Let's get out."

Crane and Rafferty bent over to help Captain Andrews as he dragged himself across the deck. Steve lingered behind.

"There isn't anyone else alive outside of this room," he said, "but you might pick up a couple of these." He patted his heat gun.

"What are you staying for?" Crane asked.

"How many men did Haymes have on his ship?" Steve said.

"Maybe fifty."

"Know them all well?"

"Damned well."

Steve smiled a wan smile.

"All right," he breathed. "Help them out, will you, Doc? I'll be out in a minute."

Crane asked no questions.

Outside, Crane saw with a start that the sun had begun to climb into view. The time was slipping away fast. He helped the silent officers into the ses and sat beside them silently. The two men in uniform looked about them with bewilderment, but said nothing.

Presently Steve emerged. He was dressed in the coveralls of one of the two dead members of Haymes' crew. In his arms he carried three large copper triangles.

"Rocket bombs," he smiled; cheerfully.

"What are you up to?" said Crane. He didn't like the thought that had flashed across his mind. "What are those clothes for?"

"You're right, Doc," Steve grinned. He held up a hand. "Don't try to argue. You'll only waste time." He came closer and held out a hand. "Look, Doc," he said. "Things have been happening to us, going our way. We've got to get that coffin off. Abe knows why. And somewhere around here is Haymes' ship. Somebody's got to make sure he doesn't spoil things. These little rocket bombs are a swell guarantee."

Crane said slowly,

"Steve, you aren't coming with us?"

"What about the guarantee?" Steve grinned.

"You'll get over it, Steve," Crane began to say, and stopped. Steve's expression had changed. He started to say something as Crane took his hand. He never said it. Crane's left arm saw to that. His fist flashed out and caught Steve flush on the jaw. Crane caught him before he had fallen. "Whew!" said Crane, "I hear these bombs go off easy."

He took the three rocket bombs from Steve's clutching hands and laid them gingerly on the ground. Rafferty and Andrews looked on astonished.

"Don't need any guarantee," Crane said as he carried Steve's limp form to the ses. He opened one of the pockets in the coveralls and saw the silver tube in it. Then Crane touched the knobs and the ses lifted. Crane was mumbling to himself. "Did he think I'd let *two* of the finest men I ever knew die here?" Crane was angry at the thought.

AN hour passed before Crane saw the great circle in the white city. He sat now soaked in his own sweat, his jaw grim. He had been long finding the city. Steve and he had wandered about half the night trying to locate the fallen ship and he had lost all sense of direction. Steve had just then been coming to, slowly. He had been so far gone with fatigue and excitement that the blow had had a much stronger effect than Crane intended.

And where the hell did I get the strength? Crane asked himself, when he was not wondering whether the sun on this planet rose in the same direction every morning. It was his only clue as to which way to go.

But that was over now. The circle in the deserted city was before him and

it was closed. The sun had barely touched its outer white ring that had the night before glowed with intense blue. If Crane derived any humor from his situation, it was from watching Rafferty and Andrews as they gazed down below, seeing Amanas and knowing nothing.

Crane let fly an oath. He was directly over the center of the circle now. How was he going to get down underneath the ground? He must have voiced his thoughts aloud, for he saw Rafferty looking at him queerly.

Then, as Crane exchanged looks with Rafferty, he laughed. Rafferty's eyes were popping open. The ground beneath was moving away like the iris of an optical instrument, drawing within itself. The huge cavern under the ground grew larger and larger. It was Crane's turn to stare.

The golden vessel that everyone called a coffin was more gigantic than Crane had dreamt. It filled the entire cavern and circle. The first rays of the morning sun glanced off the top of it and made a dazzling sight.

The ses fell alongside the outer edge of the cavern, and Crane saw something else. The vessel lay in a shallow declivity filled with a liquid, and it was rising. The night before, Crane suddenly realized, it had been almost entirely submerged in that declivity, and they had seen only the top of it. Even as he watched, the vessel kept rising.

When the ses touched the ground, Crane jumped out. Was it leaving without them? Where were— He saw them then. Harvey and Abe were at the bottom of the vessel, inside, and they were standing against the sides and grinning at him. They were plainly visible through the side, as was every little detail—and there were hundreds —of the small cubicle in which they were standing.

After a moment, Harvey walked to an instrument-studded panel and ran his hands over it. The vessel stopped moving. A small door opened near Abe, a door perhaps an inch thick altogether.

"Come on!" Abe shouted.

Steve was standing dazedly in the ses, looking around him. Rafferty took him by an arm and helped him out. Crane stood a moment surveying the bulk of Captain Andrews, then with a grunt he stooped over and lifted him to his shoulders. He carried him inside the golden vessel behind Steve.

"Got everything?" said Harvey. "Make sure."

Crane scowled. Harvey put his fingers to his ears and pulled a switch. But there was no sound. The liquid underneath seemed to boil over the side and then the men saw the pit receding slowly, and as they watched, in ever increasing velocity.

"Some boiler," Harvey grunted, looking at the panel.

They were on their way . . .

CHAPTER X

The Heroes

"WELL," said Abe, and he picked his teeth slowly. He enjoyed talking to such an interested audience. "Well," he said again, looking from Crane to Rafferty to Andrews, and then at Harvey and Steve who were playing a game of dice by themselves, "what this Thela told us is going to haunt my dreams for the rest of my life."

Crane looked wearily out of the side of the vessel, out into the placid black depths of space. Captain Andrews had estimated, together with Harvey, that they still had two more days to go. It would probably take Abe that long to

finish picking his teeth.

"To hell with your dreams," he said, with no feeling. He had been explaining to the officers for two days.

Abe sat up.

"It's a strange story," he said, seriously. "It began with the early days after the llanu fled the Earth. They believed that their Divinity had punished them first by bringing the glaciers. The second blow came when they discovered that Amanas had no fixed orbit and was a wanderer. They thought they could figure it out.

"They started what they called their great experiment. In short, it was a search for immortality—but a search with a purpose. They wanted to live to return to their native Earth, and when they died, their children sought after the secret, and then it was grandchildren.

"It was an empty dream, of course, and it was never fulfilled. But when generations had gone by, and the original impetus was gone, the work was still going on. Slowly the life-span of the llanu was lengthened until it had become almost two thousand of our years.

"It was a triumph, of a sort," said Abe, his voice growing softer, "but the llanu paid for it as no living creature ever has paid. That was what they meant by the third blow of Divinity . . .

"They ceased dying as they once had died. It happened at first to a few, and it spread quickly after that. There came a time when their bodies were too feeble to live—*and yet they would not die!*

"There had to be an end to all things, even as there had been a beginning. They were not divine. But when their bodies ceased the world in active life, from that day until it slowly and finally expired — their spirits or life-force left them, free of the body, wandering entities that sought relief from agony, and rest."

"What do you mean," said Crane, frowning, "their *spirits?*"

Steve spoke up.

"He doesn't translate it well. Thela said Raie and explained it as Lotii-Bey. It means more the life-force, the essence of being, the spark of life. They believe the Creator kindled that spark, and that when the body died, the spark was extinguished. But their bodies died so slowly that the spark lingered."

"Their beliefs can't explain concrete phenomena," said Crane. "Did these Raie have substance? What were they?"

Abe shook his head.

"You know as much as we do. *You saw them,* and I did. We saw them kill. We know they exist, whether as spirits or ghosts or as specific scientific entities which could be labeled as balanced forms of pure energy. They must have had substance, or we could not have seen them. But what they actually were, we must accept the word of the llanu. Their Raie have been with them for millenia on millenia.

"Thela said of them: 'They are the proof of every primitive's belief in the soul, the terrible refutation of the cynics and unbelievers.' "

"And contradicted herself slightly," said Steve, "when she told us of the llanu who had gone out once in a space vessel to seek the Earth. They were never heard from again in all their history. Now they surmise, from what they have learned of our world, that they reached the Earth only to die. Perhaps they came when brutes still walked the Earth, and life was too severe for a gentle race that had never known struggle. They survived only long enough to implant in the dim racial memories of mankind, rising again

from the slime, the legend of their existence—the existence of beings who had wings and were beautiful, and whose souls left the body. They call that our Legend."

"AND what was their Legend — the one that advises the reader of the inscriptions to be thankful for?" asked Crane.

"I was coming to that," said Abe. "They had to return to Earth, and some day they would. They believed that. It was the foundation of their religion. They were haunted by the agony of their death. All the while that their bodies lay expiring — so slowly expiring—the Raie of the body wandered in agony, shrieking, miserable, seeking death and the peace of death. The curse of that death decimated them. When the Ilanu fled the Earth, they numbered more than two billion. There are now less than a million. The Ilanu refused to breed, refused to bring children into a world that made their exit such a horror. They saw mockery even in the golden tint that edged their wings as they grew older, for soon that golden auro was visible on the Raie. The Divinity was mocking them, they said.

"They had to enact laws to force breeding, and they kept the laws at low ebb, so as not to provoke revolt. They enforced the law, as all law was enforced, by threats of an artificially prolonged death, a death which would keep the Raie in agony for longer periods. They could do that, but they could not hasten death. Not that they killed anyone. Knowing what death meant, they could not kill anything, or even take such action as might result even accidentally in death. They waited for the offender to die and then prolonged his agony. Even then, there were female Ilanu who undertook their suicide rather than comply. There were few females left."

"But why did they want the Earth?" said Andrews.

"Their Legend promised them that once they had returned to Earth, and in that way they would know their Divinity was appeased, that from that day on—they would again die and end their lives in the manner of all Earthly beings, in a swift death. Then would come release from all sorrow. So they called the Earth Poros.

"And then, some two hundred years ago, Amanas came near Earth again after an eternity. They knew salvation was at hand. The Legend had said that if they returned, the Raie would find peace, and after they once saw what the Raie could do to a human, they determined that their Raie would be the ones to re-take Earth."

"You mean," said Rafferty, "that the Raie could kill?"

"They killed," said Steve, "but it was more than that. The Raie seemed to be able to suck out the life from a human. That was just the way it was put by Thela, and the way it appeared to me—probably to Doc too, if he examined the bodies. Nothing wrong, you understand. Just that little spark of life was gone. The Raie vanished after that. The Ilanu said that they affected a union with the human spirit, and that the human spirit or life-force, going to its peace swiftly, would take along the Raie and give them a swift peace. Every time a Raie attacked a human, when the human died, the Raie disappeared. That was what Haymes returned for, when he brought Doc Crane to Amanas. His Raie had all been exhausted on the *Flambeau* and he wanted more."

"HAYMES, we know now," said Abe, proceeding, "according to

Thela, made a discovery after experimenting, that chlorophyl was a poisonous substance to the Raie. Why poisonous, it is hard to explain. Thela said, as we long suspected, that the balance of potential energy in chlorophyl—which one might call a spark of life, for it is a complete mystery to us even today on Earth—would destroy parts of the balance of energy in the Raie. If it were near, it merely caused the Raie to transfer living entities from one to another. But chlorophyl — a completely unknown and foreign substance on Amanas—could be activated, as Haymes found out, and as we shall, and it provided Haymes with a weapon."

From the corner of his eyes, Crane saw Steve suddenly jump up.

"The tube—the green ray—we forgot it!" he cried.

"We might have," said Crane, easily, "if you'd gone off with the rocket bombs. As it was, I got the tube along with your body."

"I've wondered about that," said Andrews. "How did you know we didn't need to have Haymes' ship bombed?"

Crane was very cautious in his answer.

"I knew," he said, slowly, "that if the ship we're in had been designed to reach Earth, that it must have been well protected against Earthly weapons, or it would have been shot to bits halfway there—or rammed. So what could Haymes do to us, after he had collaborated with the llanu in designing an invincible ship?"

"Didn't Steve know that?" said Andrews.

"No," said Crane, quickly. He added, "Keep going, Abe."

It had almost happened. Crane had known why Steve didn't want to go. Steve had wanted to stay behind with Tommy. He had seen it when he ventured to express his guess, and Steve's jaw had dropped. Steve had been with Tommy so long it hardly mattered to him whether he had lived or died after that — after he had done what he could for the others. And now Crane had wanted to avoid mentioning the subject. Steve had to go on living.

Crane heard then, heard in his mind:

"Thanks, Doc." Crane smiled, as he winked across the cubicle to Steve.

"Where was I?" Abe was saying. "Yes, the weapon. Well, Haymes got this tube to keep the Raie away altogether. And now he had what he had gone out into space to seek—vindication! They had laughed him off the Earth, and now he had proved himself. But Haymes also penetrated the veil of invisibility with which the brilliant engineers of Amanas had cloaked it, and Thela tells us that he first came there by following Raie in a shell.

"Haymes soon learned what had happened. He was suddenly a man of enormous power. For he was invincible! The llanu could not kill him, nor could their Raie! On the other hand, he could not only kill the llanu with ease, but he could ruin all their plans by returning to Earth and telling what he knew. The llanu, bound by eons of rigorous religious belief, could not kill him or anyone—even in defense!

"Now Haymes had a choice to make. He chose the road that his madness chose. His soul must have been sufficiently embittered by then so that he could compromise with the llanu as he did. He made an alliance. He would help them take the Earth, if they granted him an empire later.

"Thela says that the idea was repugnant to the llanu, but they could not refuse. Haymes could not live forever, and he would prove a valuable, if ruthless, partner. Year after year

the llanu had taken humans to Amanas from space vessels. Some of them, the normal ones, had grown too strong in knowledge. Steve's group, of which I was one, men who knew about the lilac, were beyond the power of the llanu or Raie. Any accident might prove fatal to the plans which were nearing fruition as Amanas came closer to Earth. So Haymes came in to subdue us. He killed off more than five hundred. Of the others who ran away, his men occasionally caught one —when hunger or the whisperers or loneliness hadn't beaten him to it.

"BUT there were rebels, Oran or heathens, also among the llanu. They were those who believed that our common origin was a sign from the Divinity. They wanted to share the Earth with us, not kill us off. All the llanu respected and feared mankind; the Oran almost loved him. They helped the normal humans whenever they could. But between them and us there was a barrier which could not be bridged. We knew that their Legend was false. Haymes had demonstrated it without their knowing it. We could never share anything with them. Their Raie would kill us or exchange us whenever they could, and the llanu would die as they always had—unless they kept us as cattle, for their Raie to kill so that they might die peacefully.

"The rebels kept fighting the plan of the majority of the llanu. We hoped that it might lead to a chance for us to escape. It never did.

"The break came almost too late. I ran across Dr. Bell at the Tribunal, trapped into giving his number. I told Steve and he went to find the chain. And the chain told us two things. One, that there was a ship that Haymes had helped build, in the white city. Two, that it was supposed to leave in the middle of June, to bring death to the Earth, by bringing with it the Raie of dying llanu. Only Bell didn't know they were the Raie of llanu; they were just Raie. And we didn't know at first why it was to leave so soon.

"The reason is appalling. It is this: Amanas has come as close to the Earth as it will ever come—*and it is beginning to wander away again!*"

Harvey and Steve had stopped playing dice. There was complete silence as Abe stopped speaking. His lips were dry. He reached over to the water flasks and poured some out.

"We're running short of water," said Harvey.

"Good water too," said Abe, taking a deep breath. "That Thela was wonderful. She brought us the food and water and spent half the night in explaining this ball to Harvey. You know what she did after that? She went to give herself up to punishment. That's religion, I say!"

"Still no sign of Haymes' ship?" said Andrews.

"No," said Steve. "Doc was right. He won't come. He can't hurt us."

No one had said a word about it. They seemed reluctant to think about what Abe had last said. They listened to things that were apart from all human knowledge and experience, but this—

"Abe," said Crane, at length. "You mean the planet Amanas is going?"

Abe had been sitting in silent satisfaction, as if the words were his deeds, and he had been looking from one to the other, waiting for the question. He must have waited for that moment for two days, waited while the men rested and slept and talked of innumerable things.

Now he nodded solemnly and smacked his lips.

"Amanas is going away. This was

a now or never chance for the llanu. It wouldn't have helped them, but it would have been the end of us. Thela thought that if we took away the coffin, that would end the threat until they were too far away to try again. But it wouldn't at all. Haymes could still transport the Raie in space vessels which he would take. We had to have his weapon for a full answer. And we got it."

"This is a coffin, then," said Crane.

"In almost every sense of the word. It is filled with dying — not dead — llanu. The Raie cannot venture too far out in space; their range is limited by the position of the llanu bodies. To go to Earth, the Raie would have to have these bodies transported there with them."

"Then they're still with us!" Rafferty exclaimed, paling.

"NO," said Abe. "We got a jump on them. They didn't catch us until late yesterday. You should have been watching the Doc instead of sleeping. He kept taking pot shots at them until they were all gone."

"Worked fine," Crane admitted with a grin. He fondled the silver tube in his hands and put it back in his dirty white tunic.

"He's a great one, the Doc is," said Abe.

"I still don't understand," said Andrews, "why this Thela did what she did for us."

"You don't know women," said Steve. "The female must be the one constant thing in creation. Constant in their inconstancy, maybe. Thela was the mate of the Oran who first saved Doc. That Oran delivered himself up to the llanu as a rebel. Thela loved him so much she wanted to be with him even through an eternity of suffering. And she was tired of the struggle, tired of seeing men killed and crippled.

"No woman believes anything too deeply. Even the Legend must have left the female llanu unconvinced, especially Thela, who had seen Haymes experimenting on the Raie with his weapon."

"The truth of the matter," said Abe, with a nod toward Steve, "in spite of Steve's theories about females, is more apt to lie in the last thing he said. She had come to suspect that chlorophyl had destroyed the last hope of the llanu. And, if you like, since she was a woman, she could not bear to think of a world shattered for no end."

"Only a woman would think of it that way," said Steve, unruffled.

"The only God of mortals, I sometimes think," said Crane, "if you will pardon another philosopher, is Legend. Legend which promises all for the future, because it remembers a happier day, or says it does."

"Well put," Harvey nodded.

AN hour later they were quarreling in high spirits.

"The hero of the expedition is the Doc," said Steve. "He and his mighty left hook pulled us out of many a tight spot."

"Nonsense!" said Harvey. "No disrespect for that left hook meant, Doc. Where would we be now without that silver tube? The coming of the M. I. patrol—there's your heroes."

Abe grinned,

"I'll take Thela, not forgetting that Doc called the M. I. twice to get them there on Amanas."

Crane began to speak softly.

"The heroes of this expedition were left behind us. They were the men like Tommy and Doc Bell, like Abe and Steve, and every human who gave his heart and mind and blood to the

fight. By now there aren't anymore of them recognizable as humans, but we here know what they did. Our answer was a common one, achieved by many men. Even here in this vessel, we have begun to think of how interdependent we were. We may think of the countless interweavings of events as chance—but there were men who made those chances, who fought for them. Each tiny link was vital. Without one link—even without the traitorous Lieutenant Brown who followed the orders of Haymes with those others who brought unreason to the world—even without that link, there would have been a common failure . . . "

Kimball Crane looked out of the side of the ship. It was a coffin that carried the sorrow and travail of a doomed race. The dying Ilanu were in that ship, far from their foster-parent, Amanas. Their world was each day dying too. It was drawing away again, to wander forever as a planet of ghosts. Each day would see it farther away and farther, and their existence would one day be a Legend, engraved in the sorrows of mankind, in the death they had brought, seeking their own salvation. It was the law of all life.

And Haymes? Doomed to spend his days on Amanas, or a frightened and hunted outlaw.

Crane had heard of what had happened on Earth. He knew that he was to see people who had been living in fear of unknown terrors, to look at cities razed by flame and panic, to hear tales of horror and death. But he knew that he would see them build again and live again.

The Earth was a huge round form that filled a quarter of the heavens from where Crane sat. It was beautiful to see.

THE END.

« AN AUTHOR SPEAKS »

Do authors resent an editor's changes in their manuscripts? Don Wilcox, ace writer, says . . .

What happens to stories when editors jump on them with a blue pencil?

I'm glad to accept RAP's invitation in a recent Observatory to say a few words on this matter

It's a popular sport among writers, I've discovered in the past three years, to shriek bloody-murder every time a fly-speck goes through as a comma, or vice versa. If the editor changes a title (and all of them have to) the writer kicks like a mule. If the editor shoots a little starch into this scene or scrapes some rust off that one, the writer may jump off a high building, or contemplate murder, or turn to poetry, or threaten to sell only to the Satevepost hereafter.

Writers, if you haven't already guessed it, are among the world's most egotistical people And fans, if my eyes don't deceive me, have several qualities in common with writers, among them this tape-worm ego Always overfed, always hungry. Not a bad thing, either. It can give a fellow the drive he needs to stir up a little dust of his own in the course of a lifetime.

Well, someone has stirred up a little dust, in the typical writer-vs.-editor tradition, about what happened to my story, THE LOST RACE COMES BACK, published nearly a year ago

Naturally, I'm flattered. To me that story was an interesting writing experience—and *experiment* —for I learned some lessons I'll never forget

Yes, and I'll never forget the day after, when I walked into the big noisy Ziff-Davis offices, looked around to see where the rivet-gun was coming from, and saw RAP machine-gunning his typewriter. He was revamping the last few thousand words of my story. In a matter of hours the magazine was due on the presses.

Why this last minute rush? Prop your feet up and light a pipe. I'm about to unwind.

THE LOST RACE was germinating for several weeks before the Anniversary issue suddenly loomed up with some rush orders. I had spent hours in the Field Museum getting on speaking terms with the model Cro-Magnon painting the walls of his emberlighted cave. He was my atmosphere. I had studied the St. Johns cover painting. I had lingered with interest over the National Geographic descriptions of trapdoor spiders.

But thirty thousand words waited to be written, and now there was a deadline. Okay, some extra night work would put the story over in time.

Once I get vitally interested in a story it moves steadily; but I can't force myself to abnormal speed. The deadline came on faster than the words. I recall that one night Dave O'Brien and Bill McGivern dropped in and offered to type for me, or unmire me if I was stuck, but I assured them I was turtle-trotting along at a good pace.

The deadline neared. I was enjoying the story too much to put it on skids. The deadline came —and went.

RAP didn't call me up and give me a good cussing. Being a writer himself, he never puts extra pressure on a writer when it might be harmful; and ever since he bought my first story three years ago he has given me the maximum of latitude in my manner of writing and choice of themes—yes, and the meeting of deadlines.

To resume, RAP waited patiently, and the post-deadline days heaped up When the story was finally done I finished my proofreading on the streetcar en route to the Amazing office. I sensed a few disappointments, but knew I'd be no good at revising until I'd had a week's cooling off.

By the next day RAP had a report for me. In general the story would stand. But there was one deep-rooted trouble with it.

"It isn't complete," said he "It leaves the reader up in the air."

"Just like a modern novel," I said. "But wait till you see the sequel. All I need is another 30,000 words to wind things up—"

"A typical writer's pitfall," said RAP "Well, we'll see what we can do"

You see, we had once considered making a two-part serial of it; but those plans had been changed, since no story should be left unfinished in a special Anniversary issue. I knew this. But the proportions of the story, meanwhile, had got out of hand I had laid the foundation for too wide a pyramid, and had had to bring it to a point so abruptly that some of the corners were left out.

For example, the spiders—if you recall the story —were to have lived in the distant future. Cro-Magnons were to have migrated in great numbers to reestablish the human race after these monster spiders of the future had nearly wiped it out. Thus the historical mystery of the disappearing Cro-Magnons would have been explained at last! My finished story pointed vaguely toward this happy solution (there wasn't room to carry it through) but I seemed to have forgotten that readers aren't satisfied with vague forecasts of happy endings. They want to see it happen.

So here we are with the story written, the deadline past, the story discovered to be misproportioned, the author too close to it to catch the fresh perspective necessary for revision. The rest of the issue was complete; a definite number of pages remained to be filled.

What would you have done, under these conditions, if you had been the editor? Remember, you'll be the one to take all the kicks; not the writer, nor the publisher, but you.

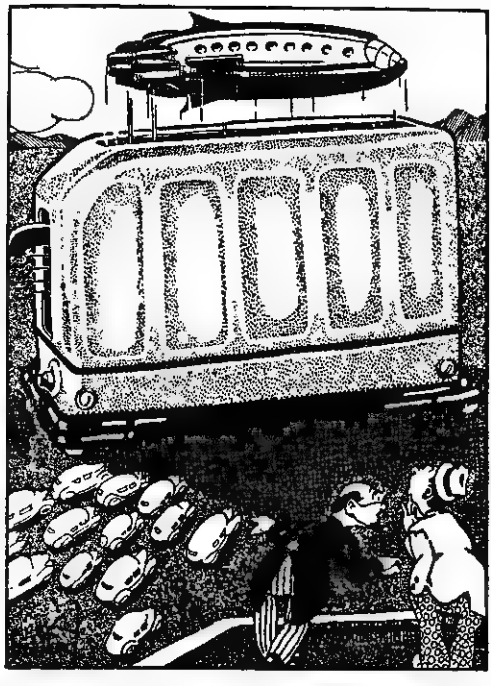
RAP rolled up his sleeves like a surgeon and performed an emergency operation. He cut out several scenes, condensed the time-span, swiftly introduced some extra plants, and brought the story through to a thumping conclusion.

"Wish we'd had more time," he told me, when the job was done. "We could have used a few more pages, too."

I think he admitted afterward that he lost a pound of weight for every thousand words he had to revise, and he looked it.

Nobody knows better than RAP and I that the finished story contained some minor inconsistencies and was far from being a close-knit, much less a perfect, story. We appreciate the keenness of readers who have caught flaws. If you'll pardon the comparison, even the plays of Shakespeare, as every school boy knows, could have been improved by more revision—but Shakespeare and his producers had discovered there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and the box office was crying for more plays.

I'm sure that both the editor and the writers of AMAZING and FANTASTIC are honored when the stories and features of these magazines earn your criticisms, whether adverse or favorable. In conclusion, the reception which you gave to THE LOST RACE COMES BACK is a matter of record; and if we haven't said so before, here's a big hearty thanks to you for the way you took to it.



"It shoots the rocket ship into the stratosphere. Guess where I got the idea, Mr. Ley"

"Look at 'em!" gasped Lester. "It's a nightmare!"

Wacky World

by EDMOND HAMILTON

Lester and Hoskins landed on Mars and faced an incredible population bent on . . . revenge!

THE dull red planet was expanding across the heavens with frightening speed. The rocket fell toward it with its snouted prow spewing fire to check its fall. Shrill scream of splitting air came to the two men inside the craft.

Young Brett Lester felt a climbing nausea as he was flung forward against the recoil straps. He gulped and choked and tried to look downward at the surface of Mars. He saw a flat red plain with a sprawling black blotch in the north.

Hoskins, who held the pilot chair, was fighting hard to keep the rocket from spinning as it fell. His square, competent face was a strained brown mask as his stubby fingers jabbed the firing buttons. There was a final blast of rockets that shook Lester's brain, a jarring, tumbling thump, and then numb silence.

They were on Mars. Lester knew it, and awe possessed him. For the first time, men had left Earth and crossed to a neighbor planet. He struggled for words with which to epitomize this historic moment.

But Hoskins spoke first. The older engineer was tenderly fingering his thigh, and an expression of great joy spread across his face.

"I think my boil just broke," he said.

Lester felt dashed and disgusted. "Your boil!" he cried. "Here we are,

the first men ever to land on Mars, and what's the first thing we start talking about? Your boil!"

Hoskins stared. "That boil's been devilling me for weeks. You try sitting on a boil, and see how you like it."

"All right, all right, let's forget about your boil!" Lester cried, his lean young face excited. "We're on Mars, man—can't you get that through your thick, unimaginative skull?"

Hoskins stared out the window. Through the thick quartz glass could be seen nothing but a desert of drifting red sand, marching dunes and ridges that cut off their vision a few hundred feet away.

"Yeah, we made it," said Hoskins abstractedly. "Now if we just get back safely, we'll have added a lot of data to rocket mechanics science."

"Is rocket mechanics all you can think of?" demanded Lester. "Here's a whole unknown world in front of us."

Hoskins shrugged his square shoulders. "It's not unknown. We know from the astronomers just what Mars must be like—an arid globe with hardly any oxygen, no water, and very cold."

"But we don't know what kind of living creatures may exist here!" Lester cried with youthful enthusiasm.

Hoskins uttered a grunt. "You must have been reading those wild pseudo-scientific stories they publish by the hundreds these days—all about bug-eyed red Martians and horrible monsters and so on."

Lester flushed. "Well, I used to read a lot of the stories. As a mater of fact, that's what got me interested in rocket engineering."

The older engineer jeered. "I thought so. Well, you can forget your bug-eyed Martians and all that. You ought to know this world's too cold and has too little atmosphere to support any animal life."

"I know," Lester admitted, "but I was sort of hoping we might find—"

"Forget it," Hoskins advised. "There's nothing here except maybe a few lichens."

"But can't we go out now?" Lester pressed eagerly. "I'd just like to see."

The older engineer shrugged. "All right. We'll need those felt suits and oxygen helmets, of course. I'd better run an air test first."

HE BUSIED himself with the air tester. Young Lester continued to peer eagerly out at the crimson desert. It, at least, looked exactly as he had expected—a somber expanse of red sand, not greatly unlike an Earth desert except for the hue. Twisting little sand-devils whisked to and fro, and over all fell the brassy light of the shrunken Sun.

He turned as Hoskins made a bewildered sound. "I can't understand this! The tester shows air almost as dense and warm and oxygenated as the air of Earth!"

Even Lester knew that was impossible. "You made an error. Let me try it."

He got the same result. The air outside, declared the instrument, was only a little cooler than Earth's and possessed as much oxygen.

"It's crazy!" blurted Hoskins, wide-eyed. "The conditions here must have thrown the tester out of gear. No, that can't be—"

"Let's open the door and find out," Lester suggested.

They finally tried unscrewing the door a trifle, standing ready to shut it instantly if the air outside proved unbreathable. But to their increased amazement, the tester had not lied. The air that came into the opening was fairly warm, and seemed exactly like Earth air to their lungs.

They opened the door wide and stepped out of the rocket onto the red sand. It was like a pleasant October afternoon. The brassy sun shone benignly down upon them, and the cool wind caressed their faces.

"Holy cats, the astronomers have been all wrong!" Hoskins exclaimed. "But it's still all insane. How can a little planet like Mars hold an atmosphere like this, and how can it be so warm?"

They took a few experimental steps. They found that they felt somewhat lighter and that their steps had a floating quality, but that they could move quite easily. But the warmth and oxygen continued to mystify them.

"I swear it's all beyond me," Hoskins was muttering. "By all the laws of astronomy and physics, Mars shouldn't be like this."

Lester's eyes lightened. "If there's warmth and air and water vapor like this, there may be living creatures here after all!"

Hoskins snorted. "Your bug-eyed red Martians of the stories, eh? I wish you'd forget that foolishness."

"I still think there might be some kind of animal life," Lester defended. He added, "As we were landing, I saw a big black blotch in the north. What could that be?"

"Probably an outcrop of dark rock in the desert," Hoskins ventured. "We might be able to see from the crest of that next ridge."

They trudged up the red slope, their feet slipping in the sand. Both men felt numb with bewilderment still at the unexpected earthliness of conditions.

They reached the crest of the sandy ridge. From here, they could see miles north across the desert toward the looming black mass. But neither man looked toward it. Their attention was riveted by four figures who had been walking across the sands nearby, and who had stopped and then turned toward the Earthmen.

The four figures were men. But they were not like the Earthmen. They had bright red skins, hairless, domed skulls, bulging chests and stilt-like limbs. They wore a complicated harness of belts, from which hung at each man's waist a gleaming metal tube.

Their faces were much like Earthmen's faces, though they were red-skinned and solemnly cadaverous in expressions. But their eyes were different. Their eyes were bulging and faceted, like the eyes of insects.

"I'm delirious!" wailed Hoskins. "It must have been the shock. I can see four bug-eyed red men coming toward us!"

"I can see them too!" gulped young Lester. "But they can't be real—"

HE STOPPED. The four bug-eyed red Martians had strolled to within a few feet and now stood eyeing the Earthmen. One of the four spoke.

"Hello, strangers!" the Martian hailed them in perfect English. "Going back to the City?"

Hoskins looked at Lester. Lester looked at Hoskins. Then the older engineer laughed lightly.

"It just shows how easily shock can foster delusions," he told the younger man. "Pinch me, Brett."

Lester reached and pinched. The older man uttered a howl of pain. "You didn't need to pinch my boil!"

They suddenly fell silent as they realized that the four bug-eyed red Martians were still there, facing them in an impatient way.

"What's the matter with you fellows?" demanded the foremost Martian impatiently. "Are you crazy or something?"

"He does exist and he does speak English," Hoskins articulated with difficulty. "You see and hear him, don't you?"

"Yes," swallowed Lester shakily. "I see and hear him but I still don't believe it."

"Let me introduce myself, boys," the foremost Martian was saying. "I'm Ard Vark. What's your names?"

They told him, and his bulging, faceted eyes brightened as he bowed to them.

Then Ard Vark motioned to his three fellow Martians. "My friends here are Ok Vok, Zing Zau and Moo Koo."

"How in the world can you keep their names straight?" Lester asked, speaking the first thing that came into his whirling mind.

Ard Vark's red face darkened. "We have a tough time with our names, I've got to admit. Why the devil couldn't we have been called by something sensible?"

Neither Lester nor Hoskins had any answer to that. Ard Vark was continuing in a genial manner. "You fellows look new. When'd you get here?"

"Just—just a little while ago," Lester answered unsteadily.

"I thought so," remarked Ard Vark. "Haven't seen anybody just like you two around here before. Well, let's get back to the City."

Hoskins and Lester stared. It *was* a city, that sprawling black mass in the north. From this distance it appeared to be an heretogenous jumble of fantastically varied architectures, with all kinds of towers, domes and minarets standing out against the brassy sky.

The two Earthmen were so numbed by shock that it took them a few minutes to realize that they were strolling with Ard Vark and the other red Martians toward the distant city.

"This," Hoskins muttered thickly to Lester, "is too much. First, bug-eyed Martians like in those crazy stories. Now a city—"

"You don't suppose we were killed when the rocket landed, and that we're in some kind of after-life?" Lester asked wildly.

Hoskins grunted. "This doesn't look like any afterworld to me. Besides, my boil wouldn't be hurting me yet if I was dead."

One of the Martians—it might have been Ok Vok or Moo Koo—yelled and pointed west across the desert. A creature like something out of a bad dream was galloping toward them.

IT WAS a scaled green monster of elephantine bulk, and looked like a cross between a dragon and a crocodile. It came toward them on ten short legs, its enormous jaws gaping to show great white fangs.

Ard Vark whipped out the metal tube at his belt and levelled it at the monster. A brilliant white ray lanced from the tube and hit the creature. The green monster recoiled, and then fled away.

"What—what was that?" quavered Hoskins.

"A *whulp,*" grunted Ard Vark, holstering the metal ray-tube. "They're damned pests."

"What kind of a ray was that you turned on him?" Lester asked eagerly.

"Well, it's *supposed* to be a disintegrating ray," Ard Vark said. "As a matter of fact, it won't disintegrate anything. It's just a harmless beam of light, but the *whulps* are scared of it."

Hoskins stared at him. "But if it's supposed to be a distintegrating ray, why won't it work?"

Ard Vark snorted. "Because the fellow who thought it up didn't know anything about science. How can a fellow who doesn't know any science devise a disintegrator?"

Ok Vok, beside him, nodded in corroboration. "That's right. We use these rays for flashlights—that's all they're good for."

Lester looked at Hoskins, and the older engineer returned the look. By this time they were near the fantastic city, and Ard Vark pointed to a great landing-field near it.

It was obviously a space-port. Upon its smooth tarmac rested hundreds of space-ships of different designs. Some were cylindrical and others were arrow-shaped, torpedo-shaped or disk-shaped. All the ships were mightily impressive in appearance. But Ard Vark sneered at them.

"That's another example of it," he snorted. "We've got all those space-ships and not one of 'em will fly an inch, for the fellows who thought 'em up didn't know enough science to make 'em workable."

"My name is Wilson Hoskins," intoned Hoskins fervently. "I'm thirty five years old and I can multiply twelve by twelve. I'm *not* crazy—"

"Ah, here we are back in the City." interrupted Ard Vark. "Where are you fellows heading for?"

"We—we just want to look around," stammered Lester.

THE Martian metropolis was a truly astounding sight. It consisted of some scores of good-sized cities, each with its own style of architecture, all crowded together side by side.

The section they had entered was one of crumbling buildings of black stone, squat and massive and very ancient looking. Beyond that, Lester could glimpse a section of beautiful transparent domes surrounded by gardens. Next to that was a section of shining, hexagonal chromium towers, and a further section of tall copper conical structures, and a still further section of buildings that looked like silver cylinders set on end.

More bewildering than this fantastic multiplicity of outlandish architectures was the motley character of the crowd in the streets. For there was a big crowd. But only a fraction of it consisted of bug-eyed red men like Ard Vark and his companions. The others made up scores of different races, each grotesquely different from the others in size, shape and color.

Lester's stunned eyes beheld Martians who looked like little pink midgets without arms; great green Martians who towered twenty feet high and had six arms; Martians who had four eyes, and others who had three eyes, and others who had no eyes at all but had feelers protruding from their faces; blue Martians, and black Martians, and yellow Martians, and violet Martians, not to speak of a few in varying shades of magenta, cerise and puce.

This amazing crowd wore garments that ranged from a simple harness of belts such as the bug-eyed red men wore, to silken trappings blazing with jewels. Many of them carried swords or daggers, but most of them appeared to be equipped with ray-tubes or ray-guns.

Most surprising of all, the women of the crowd were without exception far more attractive than the men. In fact, Brett Lester perceived that every Martian girl in the throng, be she brown, green, blue or red, was by Earth standards a ravishing beauty.

Hoskins was gasping. "Where did they all come from?"

Ard Vark stared at him. "What do you mean? They came the same way we all did."

"I don't understand," gulped Hoskins. "I don't understand anything here. And I don't want to. All I want is to get back to Earth. Come on,

Lester."

He grabbed Lester's hand. But Ard Vark intervened. The tall bug-eyed red man was staring at them with sudden suspicion.

"Let's get this straight," rasped Ard Vark. "Do you mean to say that you two weren't created here like the rest of us—that you came here from *Earth?"*

"Why, of course," cried Lester. With eager pride, he explained. "We were too stunned to tell you before. But we're the first Earthmen ever to visit this planet."

'Earthmen?" cried Ard Vark. His eyes blazed and his voice rose to a roar. *"Earthmen?"*

A sudden hush fell over the chattering, fantastic throng in the streets. Green, red, blue and yellow Martians crowded in sudden fierce excitement around the two explorers.

"You're sure—you're quite sure, that you two are Earthmen?" asked Ard Vark with desperate eagerness.

"Of course we are," announced Lester proudly. He saw a chance at last to speak historic words. "Friends of Mars," he began, "upon this unprecedented occasion—"

"They're E a r t h m e n—get them, boys!" yelled Ok Vok. And with a roaring shout, the whole crowd plunged toward Lester and Hoskins.

KNOCKED from their feet, buffeted about by clutching hands seeking to grasp them, Lester and his comrade were only saved from immediate annihilation by the fact that the great number of their attackers hampered them. They sprawled, trying to scramble up, and heard Ard Vark's roaring voice checking the crowd.

"Wait fellows!" Ard Vark was roaring. "We don't want to kill 'em as quick as all this. We want to take them to the Supers. The Supers will be able to think up the best way to execute 'em."

Lester and Hoskins were hauled to their feet. They were appalled by the blaze in the eyes of the fantastic Martian throng.

"Don't try to escape, you two!" Ard Vark rasped to them. "You're going to the Supers. They'll decide the best punishment for your crime."

"What crime?" stammered Hoskins feebly. "What did we ever do to you?"

"As though you didn't know!" raged Ard Vark. "It was you dirty Earthmen who created us, and well you know it."

"Created y o u ?" gasped Lester. "What in the name of heaven are you talking about?"

"This settles it," announced Hoskins with conviction. "We're lying back in the rocket unconscious. Boil or no boil, I'm dreaming."

They two were hauled forward through a hostile, raging throng of Martians of every size and shape and hue. Arms, claws, feelers and knives reached toward them. Hate of them seemed to be universal.

Ard Vark and his comrades dragged the Earthmen on, through the madly variegated sections of the amazing city, until they reached a section that was composed of enormous golden pyramids. They were hauled into the largest of the pyramidal structures, the crowd following.

Inside were towering machines, glowing arcs, a paraphernalia of scientific equipment. Moving about in experiment or sitting motionless in study were scores of the most hideous Martians they had yet seen—octopoid creature with enormous staring eyes and eight black tentacles.

"Are these the Supers?" cried Lester, recoiling.

"Sure, they're the Super-scientific

Martians, as well *you* know," rasped Ard Vark. "Come on—there's Agan, their chief scientist."

They were hauled in front of an octopoid creature who contemplated them for a moment with staring eyes and then spoke in whistling tones.

"My powers of telepathy enable me to see at once that these are two Earthmen who have landed on our world," he piped in stilted English. "One is named Lester and the other is named Hollins."

"Hoskins," corrected the older engineer falteringly.

The octopoid Agan gave him an angry look. "That's close enough," he snapped. "After all, even a telepathist can make a mistake."

LESTER was goggling at the creature. "Super-scientific Martians with octopus bodies!" he choked. "It's just like in a fantastic novel I read—"

Agan said sourly in his piping tones, "Yes, it was that story that was responsible for our being here."

Lester's jaw sagged. "Do you mean to say that because a story about octopus Martians was written back on Earth, you octopus-men appeared here? That the story *created* you?"

"Certainly," snapped the octopoid. "Does that surprise you?"

Hoskins laughed a little wildly. "Oh, no, it doesn't surprise us. Nothing on this wacky planet could surprise us any more."

"Shut up, Hoskins," ordered Lester. He addressed himself earnestly to Agan. "Let's get this straight. How in the world could a story written about octopus Martians create octopus Martians here, forty million miles away?"

"I see you know little about mental force," remarked Agan, deftly scratching the back of his bulbous head with a tentacle. "It wasn't merely the fact that a story was written about us that did it. It was the fact that hundreds of thousands of people read that story, and imagined us as they read it."

"I still don't see,—" muttered Lester.

"It's simple," snapped the octopus man impatiently. "Mental radiation is a definite physical force, as tangible as radio waves though in a far different spectrum. Those high frequency mental waves, when intense enough, can cause a reshaping of free atoms into new forms."

He waved a tentacle didactically. "When you think hard about a certain object you can visualize it, can't you? That's because your mind's mental radiation has momentarily reshuffled atoms into a transitory shadowy image of what you're thinking of. The image only lasts a moment and then it's gone, of course.

"But when thousands of people all imagine the same thing, their cumulative mental force is so powerful that it can reshuffle atoms into a permanent new form. That's why, when thousands of Earth readers read of the octopus-men in the story and imagined them, their mental radiation acted upon the free atoms of this planet and shifted them into living creatures such as they imagined, into *us*."

Lester objected feebly. "But why wouldn't the effect of the massed mental radiation been manifested on Earth, where the readers all were, instead of away out here on Mars?"

Agan explained. "That's simple. Mental radiation follows definite lines of force, just like magnetic lines of force. The lines of mental force flow outward through the solar system, from Earth toward Mars. So all the weird Martians whom people of Earth imagine automatically are created here from the free atoms of this planet."

"It's too much for me," asserted Hoskins thickly.

Lester looked at Ard Vark and the other angry bug-eyed men. "Then all these other different races of Martians here—"

"They were all described by some Earth author in a story," Agan answered, "and each time when the story was read and imagined by thousands of readers, the Martians described in it were created here."

The octopoid creature added, "Each time an author described his Martians, he described their city. Each city was different from the others. That's why we have so many different kinds of buildings and people."

"Yes, and that's why Mars is so cursed crowded these days!" exclaimed Ard Vark angrily. His bulging eyes glared at Hoskins and Lester. "And it's all you Earthmen's fault. If you hadn't started writing so many cursed stories about Martians, we'd never have got in such a mess."

THE bug-eyed man made an angry gesture toward the crowd behind him. "Look at that crowd—Martians of every size, shape and color! Why the devil couldn't your Earthmen's writers have been satisfied to have just one kind of Martian in your stories? Then everything would have been nice here. But no, every cursed writer has to think up a goofier kind of Martian, and the planet is getting so crowded with weird jerks of all kinds that you don't know whether a new creature is some kind of fierce monster or just a new kind of Martian!"

Ok Vok, beside him, added his own fierce accusation. "And why the devil did you have to give us all such crazy names? Look at me—Ok Vok! How would *you* like to have a name like that? It sounds like somebody choking to death."

Lester weakly attempted a defense. "But the writers who turned out those stories and the people who read them never dreamed that they were actually creating you all out here!"

"That's the trouble—you Earthmen don't seem to know anything!" snapped Agan, the octopus-man. "Take us, for instance—we were described as super-scientific Martians, with huge brains and unparalleled scientific knowledge. But when we appeared here, we didn't know beans about science."

"Why didn't you?" Lester asked wonderingly. "If the author had described you as possessing great scientific knowledge—"

"Ah, but the author himself didn't know anything about science," retorted Agan. "He didn't tell anything about our scientific abilities, because he was so ignorant of science he couldn't."

Hoskins stared around the hall of machines and octopoid experimenters. "You seem to know a lot about science now."

"That," said Agan, "is only because we fortunately had big brains and thus were able to learn a lot for ourselves. We had to pick up all our science that way! Our author could never have given us any, for I doubt if he knew the difference between a neutron and a nova."

"That's the devil of it," agreed Ard Vark gloomily. "They don't know anything about science, and so all the super-scientific stuff they imagine that is created here just won't work. Like the disintegrating rays we're suppose to have—they wouldn't hurt a fly! And our wonderful space-ships, which are so impratical that the man doesn't live who could get one off the ground."

Lester had an inspiration. "Then the reason that you all speak English is because—"

Agan made an affirmative gesture. "Yes, because in the stories we all spoke

English. It's the only language we know."

"Except for the six-eyed men," put in Ard Vark.

"That's right," admitted the octopoid. He told Lester, "There seems to have been one Earth author who wanted to be realistic. Instead of having his Martians, who were six-eyed yellow men, speak English, he had them say stuff like *"Quabo ump goohoo,"* and gibberish like that which was supposed to be a language. So now all those poor yellow devils go around here, not knowing any English, and babbling stuff like *"Quabo ump,"* at each other. They don't know what it means and nobody else does."

Ard Vark shifted impatiently. "This isn't getting us anywhere, Agan. The question is, what are we going to do with these two Earthmen? How are we going to execute them? It ought to be something original and good."

ZING ZAU, one of the other bug-eyed red men, advanced a suggestion. "Why not turn them over to the ten-legged purple men? Those purple lads are experts at torturing—spend all their time threatening people with hideous deaths and leering fiendishly at each other. It seems their author was somewhat on the lurid side."

Lester quailed. It sounded insane to think that he might be killed by Martians created by mental force. But these creatures were as real as he was, no matter their strange origin, and they could do it.

"Why should you want to kill us?" he cried. "After all, you ought to be grateful to Earthmen. If it wasn't for us and our stories, you wouldn't have ever existed here at all."

Ard Vark uttered an angry roar. "But why the devil did you have to make us such grotesque freaks as this? Why did you have to put bug eyes on us? How'd you like to go around with bug eyes, huh?"

"Yes, and how would you enjoy having eight tentacles instead of decent arms and legs?" Agan demanded spitefully. "Do you think it's fun to get around on tentacles? Try it and see!"

"Yes, and what about the hellish weather you've caused here?" demanded Ok Vok accusingly.

"The weather?" Lester repeated bewilderedly. "Good Lord, do you mean to say that the weather here on Mars follows the stories that are written on Earth?"

"Of course—the mental force shifts the free atoms of the air easily," declared Agan. "We never know what kind of weather to expect next."

He explained gloomily. "Most of your Earth writers seem to describe a fairly decent climate here on Mars—warm and sunny in the day and not too terrible cold at night. But now and then some writer of the type that stickles for scientific accuracy comes along, and his story makes Mars as cold as your astronomers say it ought to be. Then we nearly die from the cold!"

"And the way the canals come and go is nearly as bad," grunted Ard Vark.

"You mean there *are* canals here?" cried Hoskins.

"Sometimes there are and sometimes there aren't," declared Ard Vark. "Apparently some stories have canals in them and some don't. The way they appear and disappear is upsetting."

The bug-eyed man, reciting his grievances, seemed to have worked himself into a rage.

"What about it, Agan?" he demanded fiercely. "Shall we turn these two fellows over to the purple men?"

FROM the crowd that pressed inside the building came an affirmative

roar. Blue, green and pink Martians waved arms, feet and feelers in ferocious agreement.

"Wait!" Lester exclaimed. "Can't we talk this over? Suppose we go back to Earth and explain the situation to the people there. We could get them to standardize the stories on one kind of Martian and one kind of weather, and so on."

His proposal was flatly rejected by Ard Vark. "You'd never succeed. They'd insist on more stories about Mars and they'd insist on all kinds of new Martians and monsters and such in every story."

Ok Vok was glowering at the two Earthmen. "It's too bad you're not two of the fellows who wrote those cursed stories. I'd like to get hold of the chap who gave me my name. I'd Ok Vok him!"

A voice from the crowd yelled, "Here come the purple men now!"

Lester and Hoskins recoiled from the hideous spectacle of the group of creature who came eagerly shuffling into the hall.

These were purple-skinned men with ten limbs along their bodies in centipede fashion, which served either as arms or legs. From their conical head glared one enormous saucer-like eye. They held various metal knives, scalpels and pincers that looked ominous to the eyes of the two scared Earthmen.

"Let's have them!" hissed the leader of the purple men, fixing a hungry eye on Lester and Hoskins. "Boy, will we torture them! It's the first real chance we've had to show what we can do."

Lester was appalled. "Good Lord, why should you want to torture us?" he exclaimed to the hideous creature.

The purple leader shrugged ten shoulders. "That's the kind of Martians we are, fellow. It's not our fault—the chap that wrote us described us as loving to torture any Earthmen or women who fell into our grasp."

He asked almost wistfully, "You haven't got a beautiful blonde daughter of an Earth scientist with you, have you? No? That's too bad—we could really show some fancy tortures on a beautiful blonde."

The purple creatures shuffled forward toward Lester and Hoskins.

"It can't be real!" gasped Hoskins. "I tell you, we're dreaming—"

The five pairs of hands that gripped him were no dream. They both were being hauled out toward the shouting crowd—

"Wait a minute!" shouted a piping voice from behind them. It came from Agan.

THE octopoid super-scientific Martian was rising from his seat. There was an awkward delay while he untwisted three of his tentacles that had got tangled together.

"Cursed tentacles are always tripping me up," he muttered vexedly. He came wobbling on the queer limbs toward the purple men who held Lester and Hoskins.

"I've got an idea about these Earthmen," he declared loudly. "Maybe we can use them to stop this Earth interference with our world, once and for all."

Every Martian face in the crowd turned eagerly toward the octopoid.

"What's your idea, Agan?" demanded Ard Vark.

Agan's piping voice came louder. "As you no doubt remember, the hypnoid stasis of the neuronic patterns of the brain can be scanned by an extra-electromagnetic beam which—"

"Come off it!" said Ard Vark impatiently. "What do you mean—as we no doubt remember?" How can we remember it when we never knew it?

You know we don't know any real science."

"You might have given me a chance to give the scientific explanation of my idea," Agan said injuredly to the bug-eyed man. "Anyway, this is the gist of it. We Supers have a way of learning everything in a man's mind, by scanning it in a hypnotic state. We could use it on these two men. They're obviously scientists with considerable knowledge of Earth. We could gleam information about Earth from their minds, which we've never been able to obtain before."

"What good would that do us?" Ard Vark demanded rudely.

"That," retorted Agan, "is my idea. If we Supers knew more data on Earth conditions, we should be able to devise a machine that will *stop* the flow of mental force-lines from Earth toward Mars. That would halt the affecting of Mars conditions by Earth minds."

There was a pause while the crowd considered this. The purple man who held Lester hissed a hopeful question.

"Then after that, we could torture them?" he asked.

Lester saw a faint chance. "We won't let you do it!" he told Agan loudly. "We'll resist the hypnosis and wreck your chances, unless you agree to set us free and let us return to Earth afterward."

A cry of dissent broke out from the weird Martian throng. "Don't let them go! This is our chance to get back at the Earthmen!"

But Agan reasoned earnestly with the crowd. "What if we do let them go? Isn't it better to do that than to suffer forever from interference by the cursed Earth writers and their stories? Do you want new Martians of all shapes appearing here perpetually? Do you want the weather to keep changing the way it does? Here's our chance to stop all that for good."

HIS reasoning won them over. Reluctantly, they consented, though the purple men held out desperately for torture.

"Cooperate with us, and you'll be allowed to return to your rocket," Agan assured Lester and Hoskins. "All you have to do is to step under that big machine over there and make your minds submissive."

"Come on, Hoskins," muttered Lester. "It's our only chance to get away from this crazy planet."

Gingerly, they moved under the machine. From its broad lens, a flood of blue light streamed down over them. Lester felt his brain darken as the force tingled through it. He lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he found himself and Hoskins staggering under the machine. But the force had been turned off.

Agan and the other octopus superscientists were brandishing a pad of thin metal leaves covered with writing, to the weird crowd.

"I've got it all—the experiment was a complete success!" Agan cried exultantly.

"You got enough data from our minds to enable you to stop the flow of mental force-lines from Earth to Mars?" Hoskins stammered.

There was a triumphant gleam in Agan's huge eyes. "I can do *more* than halt those lines of force, now."

"Then we can go?" Lester pressed tensely. "You promised we could."

"Yes, you can return to your rocket and go back to Earth," Agan declared.

Ard Vark added sourly to the two Earthmen, "And don't ever come back here to Mars, if you know what's good for you."

The ten-legged purple leader made a

frenzied appeal. "Are you going to let them walk out of here without torturing them at all?" There were tears in his single big eye. "How are we going to live up to our fiendish natures when we never get a chance to torture anybody? How would you like it?"

"He's right—we're letting slip the only chance we'll ever have to revenge ourselves on the Earthmen for all they've done to Mars," muttered Ok Vok angrily.

"We've given our promise and must let them go," Agan declared firmly. The gleam came back into his eyes. "But never fear, we'll yet have revenge on the Earthmen for all they've done to us."

A path was cleared through the crowd. Ard Vark pointed along it. "Get going while you can!" he snapped to Lester and Hoskins.

The two Earthmen stumbled out through the crowd of glaring faces, expecting each moment to be seized. They broke into a breathless run through the weirdly variegated sections of the fantastic city.

Not even when they had left the city behind and were stumbling across the sunlit red city did they slacken their pace. Not until they had reached the metal bulk of the rocket and had tumbled inside and slammed its heavy door.

"For the love of Heaven, let's get away quick!" gulped Hoskins, starting the cyclotrons. "I never thought they'd let us go, really."

"Neither did I," admitted Lester. He frowned. " I still don't feel safe. There was a look of triumph about Agan that I didn't like, when he spoke about future revenge on Earthmen—"

He was interrupted by the blast of keel rockets as the craft lurched skyward. Crushing them deep into the recoil chairs, it roared up into the brassy sky and headed for clear space and Earth. They were on their way back.

BY THE time, two weeks later, that the rocket was roaring in toward Earth, both men had somewhat recovered from the shock of their amazing experience. And they were debating how much of it they should tell.

"They'll never believe us!" Hoskins argued strenuously. "If we try to tell them that the mental force of thousands of readers actually created bug-eyed men and other monsters on Mars, they'll ridicule us."

"Maybe you're right," Lester admitted. "Maybe we'd better say nothing about it."

The rocket dropped toward New York. It was their plan to land in Central Park, to electrify the metropolis and the world by their dramatic return.

But when the craft finally came to rest in the park, the two returned explorers were met by no cheering throng. They stepped out into the sunlight and stared bewilderedly at nearby Fifth Avenue.

A crazy uproar of excitement seemed sweeping the street. Crowds of citizens were rushing along it in panic flight. Then Lester and Hoskins gasped as they saw the creatures from which the horrified crowd was fleeing.

They were a score of men. They looked like Earthmen in many ways and wore Earth clothing. But they had four arms instead of two. And they had enormous, bulging eyes like the eyes of insects.

Lester stopped a fleeing citizen and pointed wildly at the weird figures from which the crowd fled.

"Where in Heaven's name did *they* come from?" he cried horrifiedly.

The panicky citizen shook his head wildly. "Nobody knows! They and a lot of other monstrous people as hideous

as they have been appearing all over the world in the last week—we don't know how they come into being or who they are!"

Lester went pale. He grabbed Hoskins' arm. "Good Lord, this is what Agan meant when he said they'd soon have revenge on the Earthmen! The data he got from our minds—it enabled him not only to stop the flow of mental force-lines from Earth to Mars, but to *reverse* them, to make the currents of mental force flow now from Mars to Earth!"

Hoskins' jaw sagged. "Then these creatures were created here as a revenge by—"

"By the Martians, yes!" Lester cried. "That's their revenge on us! They're up there now, the devils, writing stories about bug-eyed Earthmen!"

THE END

"SPEAKING OF FISH STORIES . . ."

YOU can never tell what you'll get when you go fishing these days. For instance a Denver business man caught a bat while casting for a trout. He snagged the bat in midair as he was fishing on the South Platte River with a dry fly.

Arthur Coffee, of Harrisburg, Illinois, while fishing for a bass, caught instead an owl. He cast a brown mouse flaptail, a surface bait used by experts. An owl said, "Woooo, woooo," and grabbed the mouse bait in his claws. Coffee jerked, but the owl said, "wooo-wooo," again with a note of determination in his voice. Coffee jerked again and the owl fell in the water. Coffee jerked again, got his bait back, and watched the surprised owl say, "Whoops," and flap away.

This one should end all fish stories: James Barnett, fishing at a lake near Dallas, Texas, caught his hook on something that was very heavy but could be moved. Cautiously Barnett pulled slowly on his line and brought to the surface—a bicycle.—*Arthur Weeboldt.*

WAR ON VENUS!

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by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

A battle fleet on land! . . . There were about twenty enormous man-made things crawling over the plain; surrounding them were a number of smaller replicas of the leviathans. . . . Carson climbed to get away from them, and simultaneously heard the hum of t-ray guns. . . . They were firing at him with that deadly Amtorian t-ray which destroys all matter! . . . He zigzagged to avoid their fire, and was congratulating himself on a good escape when the nose of the anotar disappeared, along with the propeller!

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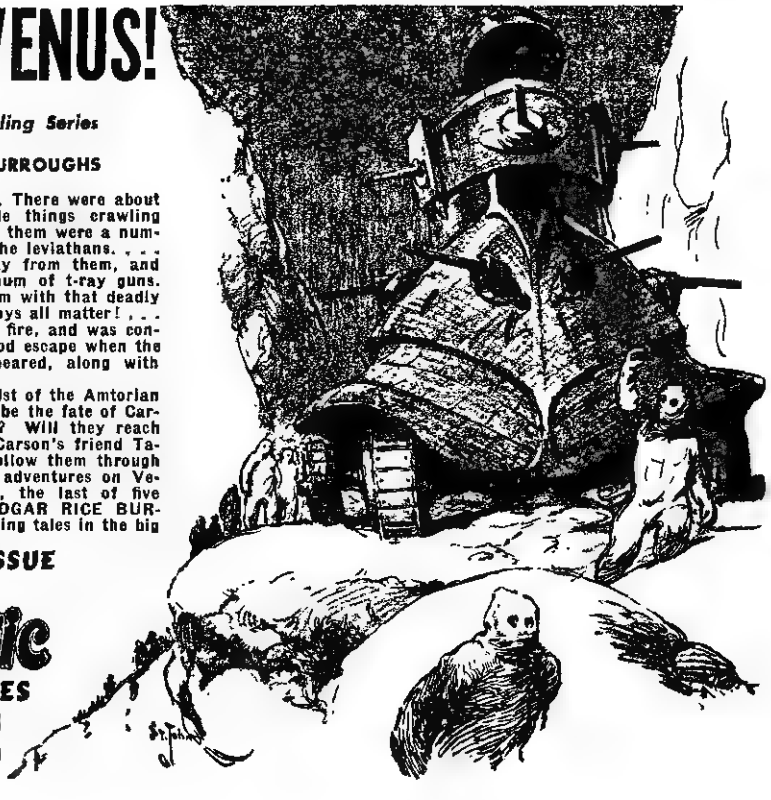

by
JEP POWELL

Gus and Fuss were mates until the green-eyed monster stepped between them. Then there was hell to pay on Venus—and it wasn't all love!

TROSH!" Captain Angus Craig snorted contemptuously. "Twa hunner poonds I bid, an' all the slont-eyed birkie offers is a pile o' glitterin' trosh."

Captain Fumiyoka, sharp Nipponese trader, smiled blandly and dangled a handful of cheap trinkets in front of the bulging green eyes of Jo, froglike Venusian merchant.

Mate Dreyfus Slagg hastened to back up his skipper. "Trash is right. Oh, such wuthless junk. Don't you bite, Jo. This Jap's a skunk."

The arrogant little Fumiyoka's lips continued to smile but a dangerous glint crept into his beady black eyes.

"I beg to differ, please," he purred venomously. "My goods are exquisite pieces of art."

This haggling had been under way, off and on, for several days, Earth reckoning*, in Jo's trading shack at the dreary spaceport of Umbawa, remote outpost of Venusian civilization. The bidding was for Jo's precious stock of bokkamee.**

Captain Craig and Mate Slagg, Gus and Fuss as they had become known along the spaceways, were losing patience. They wanted to get their business over and clear out of Umbawa before the long black night set in. But Jo was in no hurry. Trading, to a Venu-

"Help!" yelled Slagg, "I'm in the drink. If I'm not rescued, I'll surely sink!"

sian, is a pleasure that must not be rushed.

Gus and Fuss formed a strange team. Gus, owner-master of the ancient spaceship Lady Maud, was a dour Scot with greying walrus mustache and bleak gray eyes that seldom harbored a twinkle. Fuss, erstwhile desert rat, was a bald-headed, elongate oddity who resembled a melancholy and underfed scarecrow. He always talked in rhyme, but this was because of a peculiar lingual abnormality. His verse was unintentional, as spontaneous as a hiccup.

"Twa hunner, twenny poonds," Gus upped painfully. "All in minted gold."

Jo shifted his vile stogie to the other corner of his wide mouth, scratched his rusty, hairless head with a claw-tipped finger, and looked inquiringly at Fumyyoka. The Jap nodded and one of his four flunkies dumped another heap of gimcracks on the counter. Fumiyoka beamed magnanimously.

"Let's hit the trail," Fuss groaned to Gus. "We ain't got a look in. An' let this frawg wail when he finds hisself took in." Then in a final appeal to the Venusian. "Look, Jo, don't be a sap. Don't have no truck with that slinky J—"

His last work died a-borning as a comely, plumpish Earthwoman in her middle thirties entered and stood demurely at the counter. She wore a transparent slicker over riding breeches and sweater that stretched taut in places. She was bareheaded, and droplets of Venusian mist on her auburn ringlets formed a jeweled tiara. Her very large, very blue eyes looked friendly. Fuss sighed audibly.

FUMIYOKA strutted over to her like a bantam rooster. He touched his cap and bowed low. "Ah-h-h," he murmured through a toothy smile. "How is it the lovely Earth flower is transplanted to this dismal Venusian garden?"

She gave him a quick, uneasy smile and tried to move away. The hackles stiffened on Fuss's scrawny neck.

"Wait," purred the Jap. "Captain Fumiyoka admires the exquisite Earth flower. See?" He looped a string of cheap beads around her neck and gave her an intimate pinch.

She uttered a panicky whimper and glanced around appealingly. Fuss rose to the occasion with a vicious back-hand swipe that sent the Jap spinning into a corner.

Fumiyoka came up with an automatic in his hand. But he never fired it. A barking six-shooter seemed to leap into Fuss's hand from its holster. Fumiyoka dropped his gun and grabbed his arm. He bared his teeth in a stoic grin.

"We meet again soon, eh?" he hissed meaningly. "Until then, I bid Captain Craig and his honorable Mate good day."

"Next time, you'd better try jujitsu, or somep'n else that fits you," Fuss growled. "I could make a six-gun talk long before I learnt to walk."

Fumiyoke and his men departed for their spaceship to patch up the wounded flipper.

"Wheest!" groaned us. "Noo ye've done it. The slont-eyed roscal will be oot to get us baith."

"Yez," Jo croaked solemnly. He snuffed out his cigar and dropped it into the pocket of a pair of faded shorts, his only garment. "Jap trader iz one bad guy. Long time come but he no vorget. Iz dangerouz guy."

---

* Because of the great length of Venusian days and nights, periods of time throughout this narrative are measured by Earth standards.—Ed.

** Bokkamee, the dried and crushed bodies of a rare insect found only in certain areas of the planet, Venus, is made into an expensive perfume.—Ed.

The full import of this warning smote Fuss like an icy blast from the Sierras. Goose pimples sprouted on his back. In a moment of brash heroics he had incurred the enmity of one of the most dangerous scoundrels of the spaceways. Fumiyoka's reputation was universal.

Fuss feared no creature who fought in the open, but ethical battle was not Fumiyoka's style. A blade or a bullet in the back was his trade-mark.

Fuss shivered. Then he looked down into a pair of very large, very blue eyes and felt new courage surge into his lean breast.

"Oh-h-h, you're so bur-rave," she cooed. "I don't know how to thank you, Mr. —uh."

"Dreyfus Slagg, at your service, ma'am. I don't brag 'bout how brave I am but when a lady's in distress, then an' there, I must confess, danger's somep'n I don't shun. Anyway, my duty was all I done."

"How charmingly quixotic," she gasped. "And a poet, too."

"They call me the Bard o' Hellcat Hole, back home in the good ol' U. S. A. But I declare upon my soul, I don't try to rhyme the things I say." Fuss paused for an awkward moment. Then, "If this gun-play got you alarmed, I'll gladly take you home unharmed. As a matter of pure unvarnished fact, I'd downright sure enjoy the act."

She smiled fetchingly, made her purchase, then took the lank arm Fuss proffered. They marched out into the misty drizzle, leaving Gus to continue his dickering with Jo.

"NICE weather," she commented, not as a conversation-opener but as an observation of fact. Relatively, it was indeed nice weather. The mild drizzle was a welcome respite from the heavy rains. It rains almost continuously on the cloud-blanketed planet of Venus, and when water is not falling it is rising in steamy mists. Then the gaspy mugginess is worse than the rain.

Cynthia Lowell was her name, she said, not her real name, but her nom de plume. She had always wanted to be a writer, so when her husband died two years previously, leaving her with some means, she had left America in search of exotic backgrounds for her literary labors. Hence her presence in Umbawa. None of her writings had seen print, she admitted. She also did poems occasionally.

They walked along the narrow, muddy footpath that was the main thoroughfare. It took them past Big Mama's place, the only two-story house in Umbawa. Here Big Mama, an ebon Alabama lady of great enterprise and greater avoirdupois, conducted a combination inn and hot spot.

The hostesses in Big Mama's dance salon were strictly local talent. After she fitted wigs over their hairless noggins, lavished make-up on their faces, and ensconced them in clingy dresses that draped down to hide their webbed feet, the little aboks* made right passable partners in terpsichore.

Big Mama's juke organ was giving out blatantly.

"You don't go there, do you?" Cynthia asked, casting a disapproving glance at the imposing edifice.

"Me go there?" Fuss scoffed. "That cheap, notorious dump. I don't care for that kind of—"

"Yooo-hoooo! Howdy, Mr. Fuss," Big Mama whinnied from a window. A white-toothed grin split her round, black face. She lifted a meaty arm and waved.

Fuss and Cynthia walked on in embarrassed silence.

*Aboks are female Venusians. The males are boks.—Ed

"Well, here we are." Cynthia halted in front of a small cottage on stilts. "I don't know how to tell you how gurrateful I am for your—uh, gallantry." She paused pensively. "I wanted to ask you for tea tomorrow, and to listen to some of my poor verse, but I suppose you'd rather—" She shot a significant look in the direction of Big Mama's.

"Oh-h-h-h!" Fuss groaned deprecatingly. "Please don't think I like that dive. I was there just once, sure as I'm alive."

"We-ell," she considered. "May I expect you at four?"

"I'll be here sure, come mist or hail or driving rain. I can hardly endure the hours till I see you again."

"You're so-o-o romantic," Cynthia sighed. Her eyelids fluttered and Fuss experienced a delightful attack of vertigo. He left her beatific presence like one in a dream. His usually melancholy visage now was wreathed in a comic radiance. In all his forty-odd years, none of the fair sex ever had touched his callous heart. But this angelic bundle of blue eyes and sweet plumpness not merely had touched it—she had captured it. At just one tiny word, he felt, he would eagerly plunge his horny fist into his breast, rip out his heart by the roots, and tender it to her, quivering and drippy.

CAPTAIN GUS stood beside the airlock of Lady Maud and glowered through the steamy fog at the little yellow figures who scurried about like ants, polishing the gleaming sides of Fumiyoka's powerful ship on the other side of the spaceport. The sleek oriental craft outshone the aged Lady Maud like a new dime beside a rusty penny.

Lady Maud once had been a de luxe spaceliner and Gus was a cabin boy aboard her. They never parted company. Newer, speedier and more luxurious liners had displaced her and now she was a lowly tramp freighter. Gus owned her and loved her—loved her like a living creature. Indeed, there were times when she was remarkably like a proud and whimsical old lady, aloof toward all save her worshipful skipper.

Gus patted her mottled plates and sighed reverently. He shot another scornful look at the shiny Nipponese ship. "Yon tin boiler glistens like 'er laithsome moster," he grunted.

Fuss snapped out of a pleasant reverie. "What about that slinky little Nippon snipe, has he been back to Jo's with his gaudy tripe?"

"Nay, an' that's whut's a-botherin' me. He wants that bokkamee an' a triflin' flesh wound wudna stop 'im fra barterin'. Belike the roscal's plonnin some dostardly trick."

Gus paused to chew on a wisp of his mustache. "Aye, he's up to dirty work, an' a-waitin' furr the darkness to set in. If I cud ony goad Jo into dickerin', we'd be oot o' here afore the night comes."

Love, it is said, obscures one's sense of danger. Then Fuss was in total eclipse. He was in no hurry to leave Umbawa.

"What's a day or so, more or less? We've wiggled out of many a mess. If darkness comes, then let it come. I ain't skeered of that slant-eyed bum."

He looked at his ancient watch and thought of tea for two at four. "I got to go see a guy about a mule. Meanwhile, don't get het up. Keep calm and cool."

He strode jauntily away, leaving a puzzled Gus tugging at his ragged mustache.

FUSS marveled at Cynthia's cool loveliness in a crisp organdie frock, while he sat simmering in his own juice.

So great was the humidity, he was sure he could wring water out of the air.

He listened for an hour to her poems about moon and June, about love and stars above. Finally she suggested that he recite one of his poems.

"O, Cynthia—" he began.

"Yes, go on," she urged.

"O, Cynthia—" He got no further. All his life he had spouted effortless rhyme, but now he was inarticulate. He sputtered miserably and gave up.

Cynthia suggested a boat ride. She called Oggo, her Venusian all-purpose servant, and told him to get her boat.

It was only a muddy bateau on a murky Umbawan slough but, to Fuss, it was a gondola on a moonlit Venetian canal; and Oggo, who ripped out an occasional stomachy grunt as he poled them along, was a golden-throated gondolier.

Into the wide bayou they drifted and Cynthia began to croon a Jovian love song. As she finished, she dropped her eyes to the water, then came up with a slow, sidelong glance that sent a bee—a precious honey bee—crawling up Fuss's spine.

Cynthia let her hand dangle over the side of the boat and plucked a water hyacinth. She smelled it— Or did she touch it to her lovely lips?—and tossed it to Fuss.

He held it to his long proboscis and his nostrils quivered like those of a rabbit sniffing a juicy carrot. Then he crushed the flower to his lean bosom.

"O, Cynthia—" he tried again. "O, Cynthia— Aw-w-w-nuts! I— I can't rhyme no more. The Muse has forsook me."

"I believe you're bashful, Dreyfus," she smiled. She noticed it was growing late and told Oggo to take them to Jo's store.

All the way there Fuss was wretchedly silent. His tongue had failed him—nay, tricked him—at a time when he most needed his rhyme.

Leaving Jo's store they met a naked little abok mother carrying her saucer-eyed bokkin on her back, his tiny arms clasped tightly around her neck. She sidled off the path.

"Oh-h-h, isn't he cu-te?" Cynthia exclaimed. "Please let me hold him."

The shy little abok yielded reluctantly.

"Isn't he a little angel?" Cynthia gushed. She cuddled the mud-crusted angel to her breast.

Venusian babies, all head and practically no body, like animated apostrophes, reminded Fuss of tadpoles—not angels.

"Kitchy koo," Cynthia gurgled, chucking the bokkin under the chin. The little angel uttered a hellish screech and struggled frantically to squirm from his alien captor. His little claws tore at her hands and arms. His mother reclaimed him and hurried away.

"I love babies," Cynthia sighed wistfully. "I never had one."

FUSS was touched profoundly. He took her hand tenderly and dabbed at the scratches left by the frightened little bokkin. Then he kissed her hand and felt it flutter.

"O, Cynthia," he blurted. "Somep'n's hit me hard inside. My heart is burstin' open wide with love an' joy an' ecstasy. Please say you feel the same towards me. I'm hot, I'm cold, I'm all agog. Come fly with me from this dismal bog."

"Why, Dreyfus," she whispered. "This is so sudden. I don't know what to— Oh, there's your captain. Yoo-hoo!" She waved.

Gus, headed toward Jo's, paused uncertainly, then came toward them. Fuss gave him an unwelcome look.

"Please don't think me bold, Cap-

tain," Cynthia said coyly. "I—I greeted you before it occurred to me that we hadn't met. But Mr. Slagg and I have become such good friends that I—uh—" She registered charming embarrassment. "I almost felt that I knew you, too."

Gus started to salute, doffed his cap instead, and fumbled it awkwardly.

"Anyway," Cynthia rattled on. "I think fellow Earthmen 'way out here in the heavens should be congenial, don't you?" She smiled sweetly and gave him the works with her blue eyes.

"Aye," Gus agreed, running a finger around his collar. "Aye, ye're richt indeed, modom."

Fuss, unable to recall the time Gus had wasted more than a syllable on the opposite sex, did not like this sudden loquacity.

"How long have you been in space, Captain?" Cynthia asked.

"Thirty-odd years," Gus replied. Then he added proudly, "I'm practically a pioneer."

"How thur-rilling!" she exclaimed. "You must have had some mar-velous experiences. Space pioneers are so-o-o interesting."

Fuss suddenly decided they were boors, Gus especially.

"Why don't you boys come over to my house for tea and sandwiches?" Cynthia suggested. "Look," she held up a rusty tin. "I've got ham. Real Virginia ham."

"Sure," Fuss said. "I'll be more'n glad to, but I reckon Gus couldn't if he had to. He's got a pressing deal with Jo. Well, so long, Gus— Come on, Cynthia, let's go."

"Nonsense!" Cynthia pouted. "Couldn't your old business wait just a teeny weeny while, Captain?"

"Aweel," Gus said with a tone of eagerness.

"Still an' all, that boat's so small," Fuss put in weakly.

"We'll walk," Cynthia declared. She gave her groceries to Oggo and sent him home with the bateau.

"I feel so-o-o safe now," she sighed, squeezing two bony arms simultaneously as the trio moved along the narrow path. "Two brave, strong men to protect little me."

GUS and Fuss were not on speaking terms at breakfast. The scintillating but vacillating Cynthia had alternately thur-rilled to Gus's grossly exaggerated travelogues and adored Fuss's ebullient rhymes.

They, in turn, had divided their time between calf-eyed glances at the fetching widow and sour stares at each other. The old Green-Eyed-Monster — Jealousy—had reared its ugly head between them.

After breakfast Fuss kept to his cabin for hours, glowering at the monotonous rain. The grey clouds were growing steadily darker, marking the end of the long Venusian day. The stygian night was just a few hours away.

An acute emptiness gnawed at his innards as he recalled the wonderment in Cynthia's eyes as she listened to Gus's yarns of space adventure. The feeling of emptiness was accompanied by thoughts of Cynthia's tea and sandwiches. He sighed deeply—and hungrily—and reached for his boots and slicker.

He stopped short in the corridor and lifted his long nose to sniff like a giraffe sampling the wind. He turned back and followed the scent to Gus's cabin, whence wafted the heavy fragrance of cologne, lavishly splashed. Gus stood in front of a mirror pruning his walrus mustache. His face, shaved twice over and painfully close, shone like a freshly-spanked papoose, and his salt-

and-pepper hair, slicked down with pomade from the trade goods, was reminiscent of a drenched 'possum. He was gurgling a tune:

" . . . a lossie, a bonnie, bonnie lossie.

"She's as fairrr as a lily in the . . ."

"Brrrrraaaaak!" Fuss broke in with the sound of canvas ripping. "You danged ol' dodderin', clownish fop. Where you goin' with face all shined an' ears a-lop?"

"Where ye gang?" Gus retorted. "All dinket oot in boots an' sleeker. It's no use if ye're a-headin' furr Cynthy's h o o s e. That w h a I'm a-boond."

"Wh— wh—" Again Fuss's tongue failed him.

"Aye," Gus said airily. "She osked me furr a boat ride."

Fuss was speechless for one moment of stabbing agony. Then words poured forth in a scathing torrent. "You double-crossin', sneakin' love pirate. Skunks are a dang sight better'n I rate the lowdown varmint you turned out to be. Once you was a man, but now you're just a snake to me." He twisted his lips and spat as if the very sight of Gus put a bad taste in his mouth. Serpent, viper and even wuss. I'm off, I'm through, I'm quittin' you, Gus."

"Gude riddance," Gus snarled. "Ye ongrateful, craggit speldron. I took ye in, a droonken skellum, an' tried to make a mon o' ye. Now ye turrn on yurr beenefactor." His mustache quivered angrily. "Oot wi' ye. Git yurr duffle an' git!"

IN a corner of Jo's trading shack, the most wretched creature in all the wide reaches of space huddled on a zipper bag that contained all of his belongings.

"Ware yo bozz man?" Jo asked sympathetically.

"The danged ol' coot's gone plumb insane. To heck with business, it's wimmin on the brain."

"Miz Lowell?" Joe inquired. "Zhe vine lady."

Fuss nodded and vented an abysmal sigh.

"Excuze," Jo grunted and hopped to the front to greet a customer, an Earthman new to Umbawa.

"Hiya, chum," boomed the newcomer. He was robust and pompous, with the hearty smile of a chamber of commerce greeter. "Alfred Hardy's the name. Just call me Al. Nice little town you got here." He made a grandiose sweep with his arm to include the whole soggy village.

Jo beamed proudly.

"May be just the place I'm looking for." Al lowered his voice confidentially. "I'm going to open up a subdivision, sell homesites to wealthy people who want to get away from the hustle and bustle of a busy universe. Yep, this may be the spot."

He closed his eyes and placed a pudgy finger to his temple. "Hm-m-m. Umbawa, Garden Spot of Venus . . . Umbawa, City of Contentment . . . Live in Quiet, Quaint Umbawa. . . . Yep, it's got possibilities, chum."

"How you come Umbawa?" Jo asked.

"On my yacht, the Golden Gull," Al said. "She's anchored there in the bay. I've been cruising all over this planet, looking for just such a glorious spot as this."

Fuss edged to a window and peered through the rain at the Golden Gull. It was a gross libel against any bird, a rusty, mustard-colored craft, slightly alist, that resembled a decrepit garbage scow.

"Stranger, you're shore a puzzle. What sort of stuff you guzzle that makes all things you see look as bright

as bright can be?"

"Eh? I didn't see you there in the corner, chum," Al chuckled. "Things are always as you see 'em. Yep, I only look at the silver linings. What's your angle in Umbawa?"

"I'm what you might call on the loose. I had a job but it wasn't no use. My boss, he up an' stole my gal. Now I'm open for propositions, pal."

"Hm-m-m," Al hummed. "Might be able to use you. Yep, just the man I need. Good slogan man. You're hired, chum."

He paused and gave Fuss a sympathetic look. "From your droopy look, I'd guess said heart snatch was recent, huh? You need something to cheer you up. Know any place where we could take on a couple of snorts?"

"There's just one spot, it's quite a dive. The swamp rum's hot, an' so's the jive. I'll go along and show you where, but I won't poke my face in there."

"Don't you like that," Al scoffed. "Look, I might be able to patch things up for you with the little lady. Yep, I'm sure I could, and put your rival in the grease. Let's go to this joint and talk it over."

FUSS sipped cautiously at the potent hooch as he unburdened his woe to the sympathetic Al.

"Don't you worry, chum. I can handle this as smooth as silk," Al assured. "Yep, just tell me where the lady lives. I'll call on her when I leave here, and you'll be the fair-haired boy again in no time."

Fuss felt better. A vengeful scheme began to hatch in his noodle as he watched several of Fumiyoka's crewmen spending good money like proverbial sailors. All he needed was Big Mama's cooperation. He sought that worthy lady.

Big Mama wiggled her head as Fuss unfolded his plan.

"It sounds screwy to me," she declared. "Once my gals git dey claws on dat no 'count trash, dey won't want to turn it loose." Big Mama always called her little abok hostesses her "girls" and gave them fancy names few of them could pronounce.

"Ain't you the boss of this jive crew?" Fuss demanded. "An' can't you tell 'em what to do?"

"I sho is, an' I sho kin," she declared emphatically.

"That's swell," Fuss said. "Well?"

"Awright, Big Shorty. I'll do it 'cause I always likes to he'p folks dat come fum where I come fum."

One by one she called her hostesses and told them to accept no more cash from the Japs for drinks and dances, but to require payment in trinkets. Then, one by one, the Japansese slipped away, only to return later with pockets bulging.

Soon Fuss was bending a willing elbow and a benign feeling of good fellowship stole over him. He looked for his new friend, Al, and found him in a booth in a close huddle with a blonde-wigged mulok* named Esmerelda. Fuss did not disturb them. He appraised the hostesses in their sleazy dresses and garish make-up. How could he pick out just one dancing partner from so glamorous a bevy? He decided to play the field.

"Yippee!" he whooped. "Crank up that box, I'll feed the slot. Pick me a tune, an' pick it hot. Come here, Toots, you in brown. Grab aholt, we're goin' to town."

Several dances and many drinks later Fuss decided to go other places and see new things. Just where was not exactly clear to him—nor was anything else. He reeled out of Big

*A mulok is a half-breed. Esmerelda's mother was a Venusian, her father an Earthman.—ED.

Mama's in high glee, followed by two aboks alarmed about his safety.

He reared back and fractured the Umbawan quiet with a blood-curdling Comanche yell, then plunged into the darkness and rain. He mistook a rickety pier for a path beside the slough.

"Yeee—aaaa-hooo! Yippee! Yee —" SPLASH!

The two aboks dived to his rescue as he threshed about in shallow water like a wounded flamingo. They helped him to his feet and he stood knee-deep in water, an arm around each. The water was tepid, but it was wet—and sobering.

A bateau hove alongside. Two figures in it cuddled cozily under a large umbrella.

"Howdedoo, Mister Slagg," Gus chuckled evilly. "Forget yurr bathin' suit?"

Fuss stammered for a fitting retort, failed to find it. He looked at Cynthia with the hangdog expression of a kid caught in the cookie jar. She lifted her chin and turned her head disdainfully. The bateau drifted on. Oggo, squatting on the stern, ripped out a cheery grunt.

Fuss stood there for one awful moment, long arms outstretched toward the departing boat. Then his arms dropped heavily to his sides and he sloshed up the slough like a dejected crane.

AFTER an eternity of aimless wandering, Fuss found himself near the Lady Maud. He had not come there purposefully, he was merely aware that she lay only a few yards ahead.

He was aware, too, that all was not well with Lady Maud. It was only a premonition, but a convincing one—and sinister. He peered anxiously at the dim light in the airlock and started stealthily toward it. Suddenly he stopped, realizing that he had severed relations with Lady Maud and her love-pilfering captain. Yet something urged him on.

His hand reached for his six-gun. But it was not there. He had "checked" it in compliance with Big Mama's safety rule.

He paused outside the open airlock and strained his ears. He heard nothing, not even crewmen swapping yarns or wrangling over a crap game. Where was the guard? The airlock was never left open without a guard.

Fuss eased off his squshy shoes, tiptoed into the ship, and made for the main corridor.

"Hands up, please," hissed a familiar voice behind him. "And turn around."

Fuss raised his hands slowly and turned.

The automatic in Fumiyoka's hand did not waver.

"Blaze away!" Fuss snarled without rhyme.

"No hurry," Fumiyoka murmured. He barked a command in Japanese and two husky aides came from the power room.

"The Honorable Fussy would like to try jujitsu, eh?" Fumiyoka purred. "So be it."

One of his aides crouched and sprang. Fuss suddenly found himself in mid-air, long arms and legs imitating a Dutch windmill in a tornado. His feet hit the ceiling and his head clunked against the floor. He took off again and executed a dizzy loop. As he headed in for another one-point landing, frantically clawing the air like a cat going over Niagara, his fingers seized a hold on his tormentor's uniform—and held.

The two went down together, with Fuss desperately gathering the wiry Jap into a bony embrace, determined to

carry along a hunk of Nipponese ballast if he took off again. But another take-off seemed unlikely. The Jap was struggling weakly and gasping like a beached fish, his windpipe squeezed shut by Fuss's long arm.

Then Fumiyoka's other aide moved in. He brought his pistol down in a crunching blow. Fuss sailed away again—but this time he floated instead of hurtling. He was vaguely conscious of the gun smashing against his head again, and again, as he drifted into oblivion.

CAPTAIN GUS, torn from Cynthia's blissful presence by news of havoc on his ship, gazed sorrowfully at the battered Fuss.

"Kilt!" he gulped. "Kilt whilst defendin' the Lady Maud." His eyes blurred and his whiskers trembled. "By Crivens, that murderin', slont-eyed spawn o' hell will not get away wi' it."

He gripped his pistol and stomped toward the airlock.

"Hold on, Cap'n Gus," urged Buzz Crawford, ship's cosmophone operator. "Hadn't you better call the Venusian authorities?"

"Sheugh!" Gus spat. "Venoosian justice! Like treakle in cauld weather. I'll hondle this—" He was interrupted by a feeble, quavery song:

"Crank up that box, I'll feed the slot,
"Pick me a tune, an' pick it hot.
"I'm rootin', tootin' sportin' guy
"Hell-bent for fun an' feelin' spry."

"Wheest!" Gus gasped. "Whut's that?"

"It –it's him," Crawford stammered, pointing shakily.

"Ma sainted minny," Gus whispered. "Be ye alive, mon?"

Fuss only groaned.

Gus knelt and peered anxiously into Fuss's bloody visage. "Speak agin', Fuss."

No reply.

"Onswer me," Gus choked. "It's me, gus, yurr auld crony."

Crawford returned with the brandy. Gus opened the bottle and Fuss's long nose twitched. He tilted the bottle to Fuss's swollen lips.

"Ah-h-h," Fuss breathed weakly but appreciatively. "I never tasted nothin' better'n that. Now tell me where the heck I'm at." He blinked woozily.

"On the gude ship Lady Maud," Gus said with relief. He explained that the crew had been drugged. Crawford believed the Japs had used trichlorethylene gas to put them out temporarily. Fuss had been attacked when he entered the ship after the Japs had damaged the power converters.

"Oh, yes, now I recall, I met 'em in this hall," Fuss groaned. "Then come that jujitsu stuff, which is wuss than playin' rough. They had me doin' loop the loops, an' spins', an' dives, an' oopsie doops. They bopped an' bopped me on the head, an' left me layin' here for dead."

"I'm fair hoppy ye ain't," Gus declared with feeling.

"Gee, Gus, I shore am glad. You're the best pal I ever had. Let's me an' you bury the hatchet. Here, shake my hand, hurry an' snatch it."

THEY shook and Gus honked loudly into a handkerchief.

"We'll go to Cynthia's like a pair of men," Fuss continued. "Tell her we love her there an' then. Let her name the one her own heart picks. The other steps aside without no kicks."

"Aye," Gus agreed. "It's the monly thing to—" The rest was drowned out by the deafening roar of Fumiyoka's

ship blasting off. Gus and Fuss exchanged puzzled looks.

"Och!" Gus groaned. "The feelthy heathen's blostin' off wi' the bokkamee. He was a-dealin' wi' Jo whilst we—"

"Oh, no, I hardly think so," Fuss cut in. "Just as shore as my name's Slagg, that bokkamee is in the bag. Big Mama copped the cheap trade junk from that schemin' oriental punk."

"Losh! Ye mean—?"

"The stuff was swiped by Fumiyoka's men to pay their bill at Mama's hotcha den. Now she sells all the trash to me, an' I trade it for the bokkamee. The aboks'll buy it back from Jo again, an' he'll be happy enough to go insane."

It didn't make sense — except on Venus. Jo could have achieved the same ultimate end by accepting Gus's money at the start. But that would have robbed him of the fun of much trading—and bargaining is a sheer delight on Venus.

Fuss seemed to enjoy his shrewdness.

"I planned this deal to do you dirt," he admitted. "But now, pal, you could have my shirt. I'll be your agent an' put the deal through an' you get the bokkamee like you started to."

Gus tugged thoughtfully at his mustache. "Nay," he declared. "We'll split the profits between us."

They shook hands again.

Gus suddenly muttered a strangled Gaelic oath. "The murrderous scoondrel meant for us to get the bokkamee. An' when we limp away wi' it in a crippled ship, he plons to swoop on us, seize the bokkamee an' scuttle us. That way, he gets the goods withoot payin' furr 'em."

His dire hunch sounded logical. Fuss cogitated. Then—

"A huntin' trick I learnt as a boy was how to lure game with a fake decoy. Now it seems to me a decoy's a ruse that the hunted as well as the hunter could use."

Gus eyed him silently, awaiting elucidation.

"Our cosmophone's like the call of a bird. It'll reveal our position when it's heard. We could hightail for home, leave the phone behind with Buzz at the mike to act as a blind."

"Loshtie me!" Gus exclaimed. "It might worrk."

"It will," Buzz Crawford said. "The Japs will stay far enough outside of Venus' territorial ether not to spot the Lady Maud when she blasts off. And they wouldn't be on the lookout for her if our cosmophone indicated she was still in port. But—" He looked at Gus shrewdly. "But I'll have to get six months pay as a bonus for staying."

"Aweel," Gus agreed reluctantly. Then to Fuss, "In anither day, belike ye'll be a-feelin' well enough for our veesit wi' Cynthy?"

"Another day? Where do you get that stuff? I'm fit as a fiddle an' up to snuff. I'll wash off this gore an' get my hat, an' be ready before you can say scat."

GUS and Fuss each harbored secret sympathy for the other as they groped their way through the darkness to Cynthia's cottage. Gus was confident the episode in front of Big Mama's had put Fuss in the dog house for keeps. But Fuss, having deep faith in the glib tongue of Al Hardy, was equally confident.

Gus hesitated on the porch, then rapped lightly.

Cynthia opened the door and peered out.

"Oh, it's— Why, Dreyfus, what happened to you?"

Fuss rhymed his latest heroics with becoming modesty.

"Well, uh—won't you boys come in?" she asked with some embarrass-

ment.

"Hiya, chum," boomed a hearty voice. "Hiya, Captain. Come right in and make yourselves at home."

Hardy was slouched in Cynthia's easiest chair.

"Come on in," he repeated. "My little chickadee and I were just talking about you fellows. Yep, going to invite you to the wedding."

"W—wed—? You sneakin' coyote!" Fuss sputtered without semblance of rhyme.

"Aw now, chum, don't take it that way," Al beamed. "The little girl and I sorta fell for each other like a ton of bricks, didn't we Snookums?" He put a possessive arm around her.

"I—uh—your arm, Al." Cynthia blushed.

"Aw, Sugarlumps, don't mind them. They're friends," Al chuckled. He swept her into his lap and snuggled his cheeck against hers.

"Oh-h-h, Al, you're so masterful," she sighed.

Gus and Fuss looked at each other with the utter despair of two marooned sailors who had just missed the rescue ship. Wordlessly they turned and walked into the Umbawan night.

"Wimmin!" Fuss snorted. "They gimme an awful pain. I'll never look at one again. You're the only human I give a dang about. Let's be podners from here on out."

Gus reached out, found Fuss's hand, shook it.

"Aye," he said solemnly. "Ony the twa—thegither."

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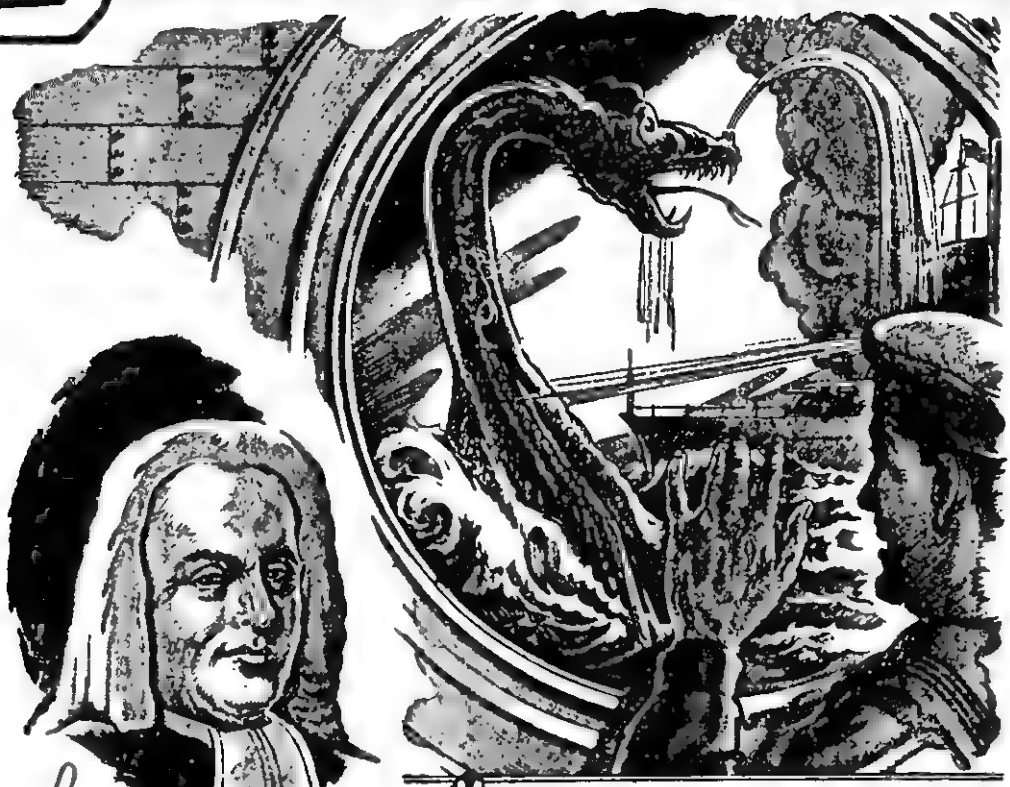

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MAY, 1917, H.M.S. HILARY CAME UPON A SEA SERPENT, 160 FEET LONG, SEVENTY MILES SOUTH OF ICELAND. OFFERED THIS OPPORTUNITY, THEY USED IT AS A PRACTICE-TARGET AND CLAIM TO HAVE KILLED IT.

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Meet the Authors

Raymond Z. Gallun

THE author of "Sarker's Joke Box" in this issue of AMAZING STORIES is by no means a newcomer to the science fiction field. He began writing way back in 1929, and his first stories were, strangely enough, about a subject that is very much in the forefront of the news today. He wrote stories of future warfare in the air.

Raymond Z. Gallun was born at Beaver Dam in south central Wisconsin about thirty years ago. He became interested in this type of fiction through his admiration of Edgar Rice Burroughs. The Tarzan stories were his first love, and later John Carter of Mars (whose adventures appeared in AMAZING STORIES during 1941) became the hero about whom he dreamed.

Thus it was natural that he should turn to science fiction when his natural bent for writing evidenced itself.

He quickly became a popular name in science fiction, and also turned a neat hand at fantasy. He is especially noted for his short stories, which are of an excellent calibre.

However, writing is not the only interest of Mr. Gallun. He is a globe-trotter of no mean reputation. He has covered the southern and western parts of the United States very thoroughly and has also traveled extensively through Mexico.

Most recent and most interesting of his travels were a year and a half in Europe. He was in Paris during the first "alertes" of the war, and, in fact, was in St. Averton, near Tours, when the war began.

Most of his stay in Paris, he tells us, was spent in teaching English to German refugees.

He spent some time before open hostilities in hiking through the Austrian Tyrol, climbing into the crater of Mt. Vesuvius, and prying into the out-of-the-way corners of Italy and France.

After the German blitzkrieg began, he went to Nantes and for a time acted as unofficial interpreter for the British Tommies.

His last activity before leaving Europe was a period of work on a grape farm near Bordeaux. Vintage was just beginning, and he learned a bit about wine making.

He was once a member of the same group of writers who claimed Stanley G. Weinbaum as one of their members.

Today he is once more traveling somewhere—which is why we had to write this ourselves.—ED.

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DISCUSSIONS

AMAZING STORIES will publish in each issue a selection of letters from readers. Everybody is welcome to contribute. Bouquets and brickbats will have an equal chance. Inter-reader correspondence and controversy will be encouraged through this department. Get in with the gang and have your say.

COMPLIMENTS TO FINLAY

Sirs:

Give my compliments to Virgil Finlay, the artist of "The Test Tube Girl." He even surpassed Magarian in this issue.

"Rehearsal for Danger" by Costello kept me gasping. What a denouement!

Keep up the good work.

Lucien W. Druge,
RFD 1, Box 127F,
La Grange, Ill.

Virgil Finlay will be back with more of his superb illustrations, in both Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures.

CONGRATULATIONS

Sirs:

Congratulations on AS and FA January issues. They were swell. Let's have more like "The Test Tube Girl." Wilcox's story's really an FA. More! Also more McCauley, Smith, Finlay and Magarian art work. Rod Ruth is good inside, but please, no covers. Try getting Mont Sudbury, his drawings are really eerie. Nuts to Lesser of Brooklyn. Your publications are still in front by six lengths.

Art Brownell,
521 West 21st Street,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Frank Patton, author of "The Test Tube Girl" has a serial running in FA, but we doubt if he'll have any more yarns for some time. He's a very busy man, along entirely different yarns, but we'll try to get more. Writing is a hobby with him, a hobby that he hasn't much time for. As for Finlay and the rest, certainly they'll be with us.—Ed.

SOLD FOR LIFE

Sirs:

I started reading Amazing Stories when I bought the January issue. Boy! Now I'm sold on Amazing for life!

The story "The Test Tube Girl" was super, and the illustrations by Virgil Finley were masterpieces. They are a real work of art.

M. Stefanovic,
905 Summit Ave.,
Bronx, N. Y.

You make us feel pretty good, Mr. Stefanovic. Stick with us. We've got a lot of super things coming up!—Ed.

IN THE PINK

Sirs:

Gads! but I'm glad to see you guys in the pink again! There must be somebody, some very special person on that staff—somebody who was so busy planning this decidedly extraordinary January issue that he didn't have time to help you other chaps work on those preceding issues.

As for these stories, the worst yarn in the whole issue was "Mystery On Base Ten". Why? Just because it's the shortest of all.

That cover! *That cover!* Malcolm Smith, spelled M-A-L-C-O-L-M S-M-I-T-H. Just remember that every time there's a good space-travel yarn, time story, anything but Burroughs' and Mac's "lost city" princess, get Malcolm Smith for the cover!

What's the matter with Krupa? Fans, do we miss him? Wow! Give Rod Ruth a regular run. His work in the December issue was awfully promising. By the way, this fandom stuff. How's for an article concerning just what we fans could do with a really united organization?

And while we're at it, how about publishing these extra-large size issues regularly? They're certainly worth the quarter.

Joe Gibson,
224 North High,
Albuquerque, N. Mex.

No, we didn't have any special person on the staff. We just got ambitious. And we still are. You'll notice this is another big issue.

Malcolm Smith seems to have made a hit. Anyway, he'll be back in the April FA, and in May AS. And after that, we aren't sure, but we can say he'll be back often.

Krupa will be in future issues. We've several of his illustrations on hand.

As for fandom, we hear of tremendous operations along just the lines you suggest. More about that later on. Doc Smith sent us a letter recently in which he said many fine things, and other fans all over the country have written us about their plans. Congratulations, fans.—Ed.

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Sirs.

I have been reading Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures for two years and six months respectively, and they are two of the best science fiction and fantasy magazines on the market. Keep on putting out giant issues. Why not put out an extra large issue of Fantastic Adventures?

When are you going to print another Adam Link story?

Paul's back cover paintings for Amazing Stories is one of its best features. McCauley is undoubtedly your best artist. Have him paint a cover for Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures at

least every other month, if not more often, with a Mac Girl on each. McCauley's cover for the January issue of Fantastic Adventures was *excellent.* Please tell him to paint *many, many* more like it.

Eugene S. Komarek,
167 Terrence Ave.,
Port Chester, N. Y.

Adam Link will appear in our April issue.—Ed.

OUR AUTHORS

Sirs:

I have been reading AS since October. I think you should bring back some of the authors you had about June, August, September 1939 and June 1940. They are *swell.* But of course I am not criticizing your present authors.

Fuqua, Krupa and Paul are masters of art.

From the October to the January issues the best stories were:

October—Mystery Of The Martian Pendulum, Kidnaped In Mars.

November—The Stevedore Of Jupiter, Convoy To Atlantis.

December—Secret Of Planetoid 88, Rayhouse In Space.

January—Planet Of Doomed Men, Mystery Of The Blue God, The Test Tube Girl.

I think you should have stories on planets besides Mars. For example, Mercury, Saturn, Neptune, Pluto. How about some more of these authors? Cabot, Coblentz, Bond, Bates, Wilcox, Steber, Reed.

Gale Caruthers,
1519 14th Street,
Bedford, Indiana.

Those authors you mention are coming back. Thornton Ayre will return with another Golden Amazon story. Coblentz with a novel, already on our desk. Bond with more stories than we can name, all of them very fine stuff. Cabot, Wilcox, Reed, Steber, are all in the house.—Ed.

BEST YET

Sirs:

I have just completed your January issue and find it one of your best yet. Those Finlay illustrations sure do look good, but they make those by Magarian look bum.

Your first story, "The Test Tube Girl" is by far the best. "Planet Of Doomed Men" was also very good. I liked "Somerset, The Scientific Monkey" and "Outlaw Of Mars".

I did not like the last three stories, with "Mystery On Base Ten" being the worst.

Keep up the illustrations on the rear cover. Paul is always good.

John W. McGrath,
63 Water Street,
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Thanks for the praise, John. We'll try to make each issue better than the previous one.—Ed.

NO KRUPA!

Sirs:

Your new cover artist Malcolm Smith is swell. Let's have another cover by him. The two Finlay

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pics were pips. Let's have him in every issue if possible, and try to get covers by him. Magarian's illustrations were very nicely done too. I thought you said Krupa was going to be in this issue. Hard as I looked, I couldn't find him.

There are two artists that you sure do need. They are Rogers for cover work, and Wesso for illustrations.

The January issue was swell. Why not make that your regular size? I don't mind paying the extra nickle.

All the stories were good except "Mystery Of The Blue God". Phooey.

Thomas Regan,
138 Townsend Street,
New Brunswick, N. J.

Krupa always crosses us up. Now we don't forecast him unless we have the illustration on our desk. But he will be back in May with a "Lancelot Biggs" illustration.—Ed.

DIRECT COPY

Sirs:

I just finished reading your big January issue. And I most certainly say it is a letdown. Oh not all of it, but mainly it's so. I wonder if Frank Patton, author of "The Test Tube Girl" ever read other issues of Amazing for his story is almost a direct copy of "The World Without Women".

"Rehearsal For Danger" I am proud to say is the stupidest story I have ever read. Harry Bates is the only fellow who has a half-way decent story. "Life For Sale" was an excellent idea for a story. But author Bester could have made it better. I'll tell you the best and worst thing that happened to Amazing this month: The best—Malcolm Smith's front cover. The worst—Julian Krupa's absence.

Donald L. Goldsamt,
55 Linden Boulevard,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

We read "World Without Women" over again, and we find the only similarity in the stories was the premise that woman was gone from Earth and humanity was doomed. Thornton Ayre created an artificial woman. Frank Patton took a real woman, and restored her powers of reproduction by making a half-plant out of her. The action of the story is entirely different. The plot is different. Even the worlds on which it occur are different. How can you say it is a "direct copy"? However, I doubt very much if Patton ever read Ayre's story. It irks us very much, but Patton tells us he never reads Amazing Stories—because he doesn't want to become hackneyed!—Ed.

A WARNING!

Sirs:

I'm warning you right now that you are going to get a hard knock from those critical fan-magazine friends of yours. They are going to say: A. That Malcolm Smith is Marchioni. B. That Finlay is really Magarian is really Krupa.

. That the big issue is just to unload some stinkers all at once. D. That Frank Patton is a fake. E. That Paul is great. The answer to all these is quite obvious. A. Marchioni does not do covers. B. If Magarian stole Finlay's name he'd have a mess of court summons' on his hands and so naturally would have the sense not to (you've already denied that Magarian is Krupa). C. Three of the best novels you've ever run, excellent novelets and above-average shorts cannot be called "stinkers"—the very name of Harry Bates should make them see the light. D. Frank Patton has that refreshingly new touch that no old-time hack could get. E. We think Paul is great also.

And on top of that, Finlay's capture in itself is a great triumph; furthermore Magarian is second only to Finlay among your interior decorators.

Wants: a cover by Magarian; a lot more of Burroughs; Adam Link; "Disciples Of Destiny"; Bond's new one about the South Pole you mentioned; Farley and Nelson in their sequel to "City Of Lost Souls". Yeah, yeah, I know, the active cranks will call that pure hack. Maybe it was, but it was the best hack stuff I've seen in a long time (though I personally don't think it's hack) and so what are they worrying about anyway?

And one last, beautiful bouquet to Festus Pragnell. With familiarity, his ideas become better and better. Somehow, I get a peculiar feeling of similarity to Burrough. That, Mr. Pragnell, was a compliment.

Paul Carter,
156 S. University St.,
Blackfoot, Idaho.

P. S. Humbly accepting C. Bernard Gilford's reality, I beg for more from his indubitably agile pen.

Your wants are being satisfied. Burroughs is with us very much right now. Adam Link next month. Disciples of Destiny starts in this issue. Bond's novel is out to Robert Fuqua for a grand new cover painting. Farley and Nelson will present their sequel in a month or two. And Pragnell comes back next month too.—Ed.

16-TUBE JOB!

Sirs:

I just got your January issue off the newsstand, and boy, is it a whiz.

Frankly, I read Amazing Stories because I get tired of technical literature. Incidentally, I like *some* probability in my stories. I've just looked over the January issue, read one story, looked at the rest, and am writing to congratulate you on a super-colossal 16-tube job.

I hate to go back to the bench this evening, but I've got to. I'd much rather spend it with amazing. Thanks for the January issue—I'll be seeing you as often as you publish AS.

Lee C. Sprague,
Lincoln Radio Service,
Star City, Ark.

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reader of our sister magazine Radio News. *If so, have you read that big defense issue yet? Thanks for all the praise. We like it!—Ed.*

BEST IN 2½ YEARS

Sirs:

In the two and a half years I've been reading Amazing Stories, I've read some good stories. Some of the best are listed below:

"When The Moon Died" (Wilcox)
"Black World" (Steber)
"The Voyage That Lasted 600 Years" (Wilcox)
"West Point, 3000 A. D." (Wellman)
"When The Gods Make War" (Steber)
"The Lost Race Comes Back" (Wilcox)
"Enchantress Of Lemuria" (Coblentz)

Thomas Moore,
46 Poplar Street,
Cambridge, Md.

Your list of stories is very interesting. It is obvious that you like Wilcox. And you bear out our poll as the ace writer of our staff. We predict, however, that your next list will have still more Wilcox, and many more other writers. Wilcox will have to step to stay on top. The other boys have really begun to challenge him. All of which means some good fiction campaign!—Ed.

A NUT NAMED HITLER

Sirs:

Three cheers for that special January issue. It was the best issue so far. "The Test Tube Girl" by Frank Patton was an excellent novel that brings up the moral support of all readers in the United States against a nut named Hitler. "Life For Sale" by Alfred Bester. I'm glad my girl friend didn't read this story about women rebelling naked in the streets of the future.

I would like to make contact with young ladies in the South American countries and Mexico. I am registered in a Pan-American club that needs information on commercial and cultural centers.

Fred Heinichen,
Commerce High School,
Pan American Club,
155 West 65th Street,
New York, N. Y.

We hope you are able to contact the young ladies about the subjects necessary to your club.—Ed.

THANKS FOR THE TIP!

Sirs:

I want to thank you for the tip on that grand Navy issue of Flying & Popular Aviation. I might have missed it if I hadn't read your "Observatory." Say, you fellows ring the bell with all your magazines, don't you? That Jap angle was as timely a bit as I've ever seen. Do the editors of AMAZING STORIES help out by loaning out their time machine!

Roger Hennichen,
Beaver Dam, Wisconsin.

Maybe we do, Roger. Maybe we do!—Ed.

AMAZING! FANTASTIC!

Sirs:

An amazing, fantastic thing has happened. What? Well, the January Amazing did not contain one single bad story! What a hit! It was just cram full with a fan's paradise. Do it again! But soon!

The cover was good. And after it has made a hit, please answer this: Smith is Krupa, isn't he? The metal border of the vat was Krupaish and gave him away.

An old timer gets top ranking as far as stories go "Planet Of Doomed Men" was Robert Moore Williams' best since "Survivors From 9000 B C.". Harry Bates, a very good addition to your staff, is second with "Mystery Of The Blue God". Third is "Life For Sale" by Alfred Bester. At long last you are widening your author staff. Good for you. "Outlaw of Mars" the latest Don Hargreaves story by Festus Pragnell was, in a word, magnificent. Frank Patton's "The Test Tube Girl" is a fine example of real *science* fiction.

Present "Disciples of Destiny" as soon as you can. Don't make it a dragged-out mess of blurbs like those that advertised the superb "Mystery Of The Martian Pendulum".

MILTON LESSER,
2302 Avenue O,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

No, Mr Smith is not Krupa. But Krupa is a staff artist, and every cover that comes in goes to him for corrections. For instance, the gadgets by new artist Smith were not as good as we would like them. Therefore, Krupa "polishes" them up a bit. In a St. John painting, we might want more color. Krupa adds it. In a Fuqua painting, we might not like a face, so Krupa paints a new one. And so on. Therefore, every time you detect something "Krupaish" in a painting, you are only proving that you have excellent eyesight, and are a heck of a good art critic. You know your artists. Even a gadget, or a face, or a shadow, instantly reveals to you the identity of the man who painted it. Which pleases us immensely. We like to know that our readers are so observing. It makes our little painstaking efforts to make a painting perfect well worth the while.—Ed.

FINE LITERATURE

Sirs:

The only reason I have written this letter is Adam Link. I've just finished reading the latest Amazing Quarterly and I think that "Adam Link In The Past" was super. There's many an Amazing and Fantastic story I've read. But this one! Oh boy, I'll remember it as the best s f. story I've read excluding none. Keep on publishing stories like this and your mag will be remembered as fine literature.

IRVING PERCHANAK,
911 Southern Blvd.,
Bronx, N. Y.

Thanks, Irwin. And so long till next month. —Ed.

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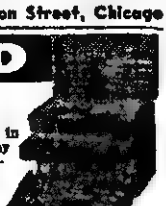

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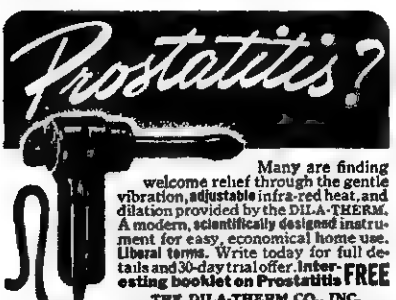

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SCIENTIFIC MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 227)

pendages of some sort dangling below its head, which most sea serpents seem to lack. A few months later the same or a similar creature was seen and reported by chief officer Kerr and quartermaster Nelson of the Union Steam-Shipping Company's *Rotomahana*.

Pontoppidan's work contains many other reports of sea serpents, many of them supported by as many as a dozen reliable witnesses and sworn to before court officers. In no case did these reporting witnesses get anything but ridicule out of their stories, which makes scientists bend a respectful ear to their stories. In general, men hesitate to make themselves appear ridiculous without some measure of gain and there's no profit these days in reporting sea serpents.

Among other accounts made famous by Pontoppidan are numerous reports on the Kraken, or giant squid. For years this was supposed to be sheer imagination, since not even the good bishop himself could produce witnesses who had actually seen such a monster. Then, in 1847 one was actually found on the coast of Zeeland. In 1854 and again in 1861, others of the hitherto mythical monsters were discovered. Between 1870 and 1877 a dozen appeared along the shores of Newfoundland. One, escaping after an attack by fishermen, left one of its arms as proof that it was well over forty feet in length and must have weighed six or seven tons at the least. Today, the giant squid is accepted and specimens are to be found in many museums. In at least one case, Bishop Pontoppidan was finally exonerated of a charge of false reporting.

But let's rush on through the years to see a few more reports that have been added to the steadily-growing mass of evidence in favor of the sea serpent.

FOLLOWING frequent reports of a sea monster off Boston, the Linnean Society of that city

organized, in 1817, a committee to fully investigate the stories. From the unquestionable depositions of dozens of reliable witnesses, there can be no doubt but what a serpent-like creature of at least a hundred feet in length, was frequently seen around Gloucester. Subsequently it swam south, was seen by passing ships and afterward watched by numerous witnesses while it sported around Long Island Sound. It subsequently vanished, never to reappear.

Wild as the story might sound, the evidence is well-nigh unimpeachable. The committee took such drastic steps to prevent falsehood that the reports bear strong scientific value. While there is no space here to quote from them, they are remarkable in their agreement on even small points of description and action.

During the time from then until 1900, almost numberless accounts of sea serpents were placed on file. Many of these were recorded by the British Admiralty as reports of their own naval officers. As such, they are subject to more than casual attention. Of these, the experiences of H.M.S. *Daedalus* in 1848 and that of H.M.S. *Osborne* in 1877 are considered scientifically accurate and factual.

For a time, then, the sea serpent excitement died away from the headlines. Then it was sharply revived in 1905 by an incident that will surprise and confound many skeptics who scoff at sea serpents as the hallucination of the uneducated.

In December, 1905, the yacht *Valhalla* observed a sea monster off Parahiba, Brazil. This, in itself, is not astounding unless you know that the yacht *Valhalla* happened to be engaged in a scientific research expedition and that the chief witnesses to the sea serpent's appearance were Fellows of the Zoological Society. These two, Mr. E. G. B. Meade Waldo and Mr. M. J. Nicoll, supplied statements which were published in the Proceedings of the Zoological Society for 1906.

IN May, 1917, during World War I, H.M.S. *Hilary*, an armed merchant cruiser came upon a sea serpent, about sixty feet in estimated length, some seventy miles south of Iceland. Not only did every member of the crew get a good closeup view of the monster but they used it as a target for some artillery practice. Having examined the creature closely, Captain F. W. Dean, R.N., ordered gunnery practice with the monster's head for a target.

Two gun crews each fired five shots which, though they struck all around the creature, failed to even disturb him. The third crew took over and scored a direct hit with their second shell. After much terrific thrashing and commotion, the creature vanished from sight and was not sighted again.

Two days later, H.M.S. *Hilary* met a monster of a different sort—a German submarine. Torpedoed, the merchantman sank at once, though the crew was saved. Their reports, and the official log entry of the event, are on file today.

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There have been countless other sea serpent reports, many of them within the past ten years. In many cases, the evidence has been so unimpeachable that science has accepted it and added it quietly to the growing mass of proof that sea serpents *do* exist.

Skeptics, however, will not be downed by such reports. A large body of these unbelievers cling to the old idea that what witnesses saw were actually common creatures in unusual positions. A school of porpoises, a basking shark, a huge turtle —those are but a few of the suggestions put forward by those who ridicule a belief in sea serpents. However, in the cases actually accepted by science as worthy of record, every one of these possibilities has been definitely ruled out by the nature of the case. As the Britannica says, *there still remain . . . credible stories which are not satisfactorily explained.*

THE commonest argument brought up by skeptics is the question: "Okay, if sea serpents *do* exist, what becomes of their bodies when they die? Why aren't corpses or at least pieces of their skeletons washed ashore?"

The main answer to that is that if sea serpents actually do exist, they patently exist only in the depths of the sea. Science knows of a number of marine creatures, native to the unplumbed depths, whose corpses have never come ashore, as far as anyone knows. The only knowledge of their existence has come from deep-net fishing. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) no one has yet brought up a hundred-foot sea serpent in a net.

Several scientists, studying the growing mass of evidence, have reached a sound conclusion that the type of creature most commonly seen would not float after death. Its body would immediately sink into the depths and be lost. As a matter of fact, several bits of carcase have been seen at times and even examined by naturalists who found them unlike any known species of creature Likewise a number of marine creatures are known to exist and even familiar to science, though no specimen has ever been actually captured or located. Several species of whales have been seen, followed and even studied for days by naturalists, though carcasses have never been located or taken.

So the sea serpent mystery goes on and will continue to go on until someone actually produces the living or dead body of such a creature to prove its actuality. Whether the creature seen so frequently by so many reliable witnesses is the last relic of a prehistoric Ichthyosaurus, Elasmosaurus or Plesiosaurus, no one will definitely say. From the descriptions, some of the "sea serpents" *could* be such survivals. And it is not illogical to think the sea might have guarded its denizens better than the land did through the eons of earth torment and change.

Many other scientists believe the sea serpents are casual members of deep sea species totally unknown to science. There *are* unknown species in the sea today, as new discoveries every year attest but whether any of them are huge enough to be

considered sea serpents is an unsolved mystery.

The sea serpent has never been definitely proved to the satisfaction of everyone, despite the mounting evidence.

But, on the other hand, he has never been definitely disproved. So science is quietly waiting and wondering, hoping that some day this scientific mystery will be solved.

CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Stanley D. Werbin, 589 Blake Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y., is very anxious to correspond with boys and girls in the U. S. and other countries. He is 14 years old and very interested in science and science-fiction. . . .N. Nathanson, 1549 St. Nicholas Ave., New York, N. Y., would like to obtain the copies of AMAZING STORIES in which the Buck Rogers' stories appeared. They were published under the titles of "Armageddon" and "The Airlords of Hans.". . . .Joe Moen, R. I., Box 311, Mt. Vernon, Washington, desires girl pen pals from Mt. Vernon or near-by. . . .Tom Ludowitz, 2310 Virginia, Everett, Wash., has all the books by Burroughs—list free. Be sure to state whether Tarzan books are wanted or not. . . .Selma Green, 17 S. Dover Ave., Atlantic City, N. J., is interested in forming a STF club and would like fans to contact her. She would also like to get in touch with Don Marvin, Fruita, Colo., if his club is still open for membership. . . .Sylvester Brown, Jr., 7 Arlington St., Cambridge, Mass., would like to buy back issues of science-fiction mags in good condition. . . . John M. Cunningham, 2050 Gilbert St., Beaumont, Texas, desires correspondents interested in the furtherment and development of a united Fandom. . . .William McNaught, Box 36, Gales Ferry, Conn., wants to obtain issues containing Dr. E. E. Smith's "Skylark 111." He is willing to buy or trade for them—is also interested in hearing from anyone with old S-F magazines for sale. . . .Joe Hensley, 411 South Fess Street, Bloomington, Ind., is interested in forming a science fiction club called the Scion Club of Indiana. Those interested in joining write to him. He would also like to buy quarterlies and annuals of AMAZING STORIES. . . . Max Belz, Waldoboro, Me., has AMAZING and other scientifictions to dispose of and he will take on any good chess player in correspondence chess. . . .LaVerne Carlson, 210 Grove Street, Knoxville, Ill., has around 200 back issues of AMAZING and other science and weird fiction mags to trade or sell. . . .Mrs. Dolores Lapi, 42 47th Street, Weehawken, N. J., can offer the following to collectors: (1) A limited number of copies of Weinbaum's classic, brand new, at $1.25 each. (2) A complete set of Edgar Rice Burrough's works. List sent on request. (4) Vol. 1, No. 1, of AMAZING STORIES and also of other mags. (5) She can undertake to procure any other copies, new or used, of books or magazines needed by fans.

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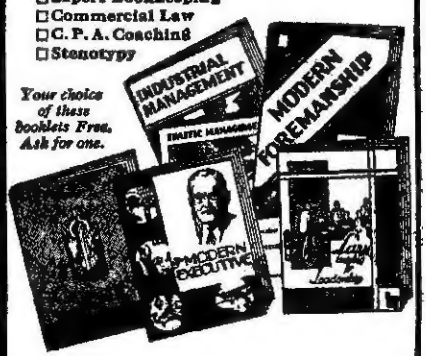

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We make to measure for you INDIVIDUALLY ... **BY MAIL** Dental Plates for men and women from an impression of your mouth taken by you at your home. Thousands all over the country wear teeth we made for them—by mail!

$7.95 TO $35

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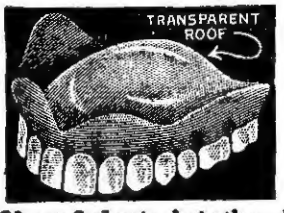
Posed by a Professional Model

SEND NO MONEY!



ROOFLESS

PARTIAL

— BEFORE — AFTER —

ELSIE BOLAND OF NORTON, KANSAS, writes: "Enclosed find two pictures. One shows how I looked before I got my teeth; the other one afterwards. Your teeth are certainly beautiful."

Harry Willoughby, Adairville, Ky., writes: "I've received my teeth and am proud of them."

● The foregoing are a few of thousands of unsolicited testimonials in our files. We don't imply that you will obtain the same results ... What is IMPORTANT TO YOU is WE GUARANTEE your MONEY BACK if you are not 100% satisfied.

At Rock-Bottom Prices

If you find out what others have paid for theirs, you will be astounded when you see how little ours will cost you. By reading our catalog you will learn how to save **HALF** or **MORE** on Dental Plates for yourself ... Monthly Payments Possible!

On 60 Days' Trial! MAKE US PROVE EVERY WORD WE SAY—Wear our teeth on trial for as long as 60 days. Then, if you are not PERFECTLY SATISFIED with them, THEY WILL NOT COST YOU A CENT. We'll take your word!

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE of SATISFACTION

We take this risk. We guarantee that if you are not fully satisfied with the teeth we make for you, then, any time within 60 days we will gladly refund every cent you paid us for them.

A DENTIST SUPERVISES THE MAKING OF EACH DENTAL PLATE.

FREE Impression material—catalog with our New LOW Prices, and information. Don't put this off. Do it today!

FREE U. S. DENTAL CO., Dept. 2-13, 1555 Milwaukee Av., Chicago

Send without obligation FREE impression material, catalog and information.

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$2.95 ● & UP Complete

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GRACE YOUR FACE *with* GOOD-LOOKING GLASSES

... Select for yourself from the many styles in our catalog the one that looks best on you. Get yours on a

16 DAYS' TRIAL You be the sole judge ... Wear our Glasses On Trial AS LONG AS 16 DAYS with a

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HIGH Quality Material, Expert Workmanship. All our lenses are genuine Toric—the frames are made of dainty engraved Rhodium or finest 1/10-12 Karat gold filled. Expert opticians make our glasses for you.

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● **BROKEN GLASSES REPAIRED—48-Hour Service.**

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15 Minutes a Day!

Give me just this and I'll prove I can make you

A NEW MAN!

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. *Right now* I'm even training hundreds of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

Charles Atlas —actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Only 15 Minutes a Day

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? *Or do you want the help I can give you*—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is *Dynamic Tension*, the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *Dynamic Tension* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you *inside*, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT—Charles Atlas!

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In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others, even those already in their country's Army and Navy are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs!

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Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength.*" It tells you exactly what *Dynamic Tension* can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. RESULTS it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-P, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

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I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book **"Everlasting Health and Strength."**

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AS MARS SEES US

What do the scientists of Mars think a city on Earth looks like? Here we have a scientific concept of what they might deduce after examining our planet with instruments of astronomy; a strange city indeed! (See page 228)